

Social Program PhD Requirements

The goal of the Social program is to prepare students to make significant empirical and theoretical contributions to social psychology. The program provides training leading to the PhD in Psychology and prepares students for research careers in academic and nonacademic settings. During their training, students become familiar with past and current work in social psychology through courses and seminars, formal and informal interactions with faculty, journal reading, and attendance at conferences. In addition, students acquire the methodological and statistical skills necessary for conducting sound research, as well as an appreciation of the ethical issues associated with conducting psychological research. Finally, students gain experience publishing scientific papers and presenting talks at professional meetings. Upon completion of their degree, students have broad knowledge of the field of social psychology, specialized expertise in one or more research areas, and the conceptual and methodological skills necessary to conduct high-quality research.

The training program uses a mentoring model. Beginning in their first semester in graduate school, students work closely with their faculty advisors on projects of mutual interest. These research relationships continue throughout students' graduate careers, with the expectation that students' relationship with their advisor will gradually transition from apprentice to colleague and that students will demonstrate increasing independence in developing and carrying out research projects.

In addition to taking advantage of the research opportunities and support provided by their advisors, students are expected to participate fully in the intellectual life of the program, department, and wider university community, which includes Carnegie Mellon University as well as the University of Pittsburgh. For example, students are encouraged to take courses and seminars in other areas of psychology as well as other disciplines and to attend talks on both the Pitt and CMU campuses.

Core Courses

During their first two years in graduate school, students are expected to take the following five core courses:

(1) A broad survey course (Foundations of Social Psychology) and two additional courses offered by Social program faculty. These latter courses (which are typically taught every other year) focus on such topics as: goals and motivation; emotion; close relationships; group and intergroup processes; conflict resolution; and the self.

(2) Two graduate courses in quantitative methods taught by departmental faculty (Statistical Analysis 1 and 2).

**Students aiming to complete their Master's degree in two years will need to complete additional courses to meet the minimum credit hours (see "Master's thesis" section for more information).

Selection of core courses should be done in consultation with the student's advisor and mentoring committee.

Students entering with a Master's degree from another institution may be exempted from one or more core courses, depending on their previous training. Requests for exemption should be made to the student's mentoring committee, accompanied by documentation of prior courses, including syllabi and grade information. In the case of statistics courses, the chair of the mentoring committee will consult with the instructors of departmental statistics courses to determine the appropriateness of the exemption. If the mentoring committee feels that an exemption is warranted, it will make a recommendation in writing to the program chair, who will then either approve the recommendation or bring it to the program faculty for discussion and decision.

Elective Courses/Seminars

Before obtaining the PhD, students are required to take at least four additional elective courses or seminars at the graduate level to deepen and expand their knowledge.

At least two of these courses/seminars should deal with substantive topics in social psychology and related disciplines and can be taught by Psychology Department faculty or by faculty in other units at Pitt and CMU. At least one additional substantive course/seminar should be taught by a Psychology Department faculty member with a primary program affiliation other than Social.

Students are also expected to take at least one graduate-level statistics course beyond the required two-course core sequence. These elective statistics courses should be selected to help students gain a sophisticated knowledge of statistical techniques needed to do cutting-edge research in social psychology (e.g., advanced regression analysis, multilevel modeling). These courses may be taken in various departments at Pitt and CMU.

Selection of elective courses/seminars should be done in consultation with the student's advisor and mentoring committee.

Satisfactory Course Performance

Students are expected to maintain at least a B average in all courses and seminars, with no more than one course at or below B-. In addition, students must earn a grade of B or better in all core courses and a grade of B- or better in all elective courses. Failure to meet the minimum grade requirement requires that a course be taken again and passed with an acceptable grade. This option will be offered only once for a given course.

Research Activities

During their first two terms in graduate school, students are expected to conduct a first-year research project under the supervision of their advisor. Typically, this project derives from ongoing research activities in the advisor's laboratory. Students should present their projects in a brown bag at the end of their first year.

Students are expected to maintain a strong and consistent research involvement throughout their graduate careers. As part of this involvement, they should expect to present papers at scientific meetings, submit papers to professional journals, and present their work at least once a year at program brown bags. To increase the breadth of their research experience and skills, students are expected to do research with at least two faculty members before graduation. The scope of research projects designed to meet this requirement should be negotiated between students and faculty to ensure that students are not unduly distracted from their primary research foci. (This requirement does not mandate that students change primary advisors while working on research projects with other faculty.)

Master's Thesis

In the second year of graduate study, the student, in consultation with his or her advisor, submits a list of three proposed Master's committee members to the faculty of the Social program. At least two of these should be faculty members of the Social program.

After the committee is approved by the program, the student submits a proposal for an empirical research project (15 double-spaced pages maximum, excluding references, tables, and figures) to committee members. The proposal, developed in consultation with and approved by the student's advisor, should contain the following sections: Background and Significance; Research Design and Methods; Data Analytic Procedures; Expected Results; Implications.

No earlier than one week after receiving the proposal, the committee meets with the student to discuss it. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 10 minutes) of the proposal prior to responding to questions. The committee makes suggestions for any changes in the proposal and decides whether it can be approved at the meeting. If not, the committee decides on a next step (e.g., circulation of a modified proposal, another meeting). After the proposal is approved, the student can move forward with data collection (or data analysis if data are already collected).

After the research is completed, the student, in consultation with his or her advisor, prepares a thesis reporting the work. The thesis should be in journal article format, adhere to the latest APA style requirements, and be no longer than 35 pages (excluding references, tables, and figures). After the advisor approves the thesis, the student distributes it to committee members.

No earlier than one week after the thesis is distributed, the student meets with the committee to defend it. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 10 minutes) of the thesis prior to responding to questions. As a result of this meeting, the committee can either (a) accept the thesis as is or (b) require modifications to be approved by either the advisor or the entire committee. The Master's degree is not awarded until the student has received approval for any modifications of the thesis and has successfully completed the core courses described above.

To receive their Master's certification, students are required to earn a minimum of 30 credit hours. This includes completing the five required program core courses with a grade of B or better (15 credit hours), as well as an additional 15 credit hours. A maximum of 6 of these 15

additional credit hours can come from registration in the Research and Thesis MS degree course. The remaining credit hours can be fulfilled by graduate courses (including credits attained through cross-registration at other universities and from other schools at the University of Pittsburgh, e.g., Education), and no more than 12 credits of upper level undergraduate courses (designated course number > 1000). Important note: Independent study and undergraduate courses with designated course number < 1000 do not count towards the minimum requirement for an M.S. degree.

It is expected that students will successfully defend the thesis by the end of their third year in the program. Unless exempted by the program faculty, students who fail to do so will not be permitted to continue in graduate training. They will be given one additional year to complete all the requirements for a Master's degree (thesis and core courses) and, whether or not they are successful, will be terminated from the program at the end of that year.

Students who completed a Master's thesis at another institution may be exempted from the program's thesis requirement. Requests for exemption should be made to the student's mentoring committee, which will decide whether the earlier thesis is comparable in topic, scope, and quality to typical theses approved by the program. If the committee feels that an exemption is warranted, it will make a recommendation to the program faculty, which will either approve or disapprove it.

Decision Regarding Continuation in the Doctoral Program

Following the successful defense of the Master's thesis, students will be evaluated by the program faculty to determine their eligibility to remain in the program and pursue the PhD. Adequate course grades and timely completion of requirements are not sufficient for a positive recommendation. In addition, the faculty will consider such factors as the student's ability to think critically, to present ideas orally and in writing, to generate creative research ideas, to design and carry out research projects, and to analyze and interpret research findings.

If the faculty conclude that the student is not eligible to continue for the PhD, he or she will be informed of this decision in writing and terminated from the program at the end of the current semester. If the decision is positive, the student will be notified that he or she is permitted to write the Specialty Paper.

Specialty Paper

The Specialty Paper is typically written during the third or fourth year of graduate study, after the Master's degree is obtained and the student receives approval to continue for the PhD. The Specialty Paper has two major purposes. The first is to allow the faculty to evaluate the student's ability to develop a sophisticated analysis of a specialized topic within social psychology. The second is to provide the student with an important professional experience, namely choosing a timely theoretical question, reviewing and integrating the relevant literature on this question, critically evaluating the work to date, and providing a conceptual framework capable of both understanding past research and generating new research.

The basic format for the Specialty Paper is a scholarly paper of the sort published in the *Psychological Bulletin*, *Psychological Review*, or *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. The paper should contain a critical review of a research area that goes well beyond any prior review of the same or a similar area, as well as a theoretical framework for integrating this work. Students are encouraged to choose a topic for the Specialty Paper that will be useful for their dissertation.

The student, in consultation with his or her advisor, submits a list of three proposed Specialty committee members to the faculty of the Social program. At least two of these should be faculty members of the Social program.

After the committee is approved by the program, the student submits a proposal for the Specialty Paper (10 double-spaced pages maximum, excluding references) to committee members. The proposal, developed in consultation with and approved by the student's advisor, should specify the proposed topic, the reason the topic warrants attention, an overview of the literature that will be covered (including selected references), and the likely organizational framework that will be used in the review.

No earlier than one week after receiving the proposal, the committee meets with the student to discuss it. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 10 minutes) of the proposal prior to responding to questions. The committee makes suggestions for any changes in the proposal and decides whether it can be approved at the meeting. If not, the committee decides on a next step (e.g., circulation of a modified proposal, another meeting). After the proposal is approved, the student can begin writing the paper.

The student has 16 weeks to complete the paper, which should be no longer than 45 pages (excluding references, tables, and figures) and should adhere to the latest APA style requirements. During the writing period, the student can consult with others, including his or her advisor, but exchange of written drafts is not permitted. Substantial deviations from the approved proposal must be discussed with the committee by email or in person.

After the Specialty paper is completed, the student distributes it to the committee. No earlier than one week after the paper is distributed, the student meets with the committee to defend it. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 10 minutes) of the paper prior to responding to questions. Based on both the written paper and the oral defense, the committee will decide among three grade options: fail, pass, or pass with honors. Students will have two chances to pass the requirement. If a paper receives a failing grade, the committee can either recommend changes (the more likely option) or ask the student to submit a new proposal.

If changes are recommended, they can be offered at the meeting or communicated by the advisor within one week. The committee will also decide how the next draft will be evaluated (e.g., each member will independently read the paper and vote on its acceptability; the committee will meet again with the student). The student will have 6 weeks to complete the second draft. If this draft does not receive a passing grade, the student will be terminated from the program at the end of the current semester.

If a new proposal is required, all of the above policies will apply to the first and second drafts.

It is expected that students will successfully defend the Specialty paper by the end of their fifth year in the program. Unless exempted by the program faculty, students who fail to do so will not be permitted to continue in graduate training and will be terminated at the end of the current semester.

Alternative Mechanism: First authorship of a review/theoretical article in a peer-reviewed journal fulfills the Specialty Paper requirement.

PhD Dissertation

The PhD dissertation is meant to be an ambitious and novel empirical contribution to the field of social psychology. Although students can expect assistance and support from their advisor in this project, they are expected to take the lead in formulating research questions and to show substantial independence in designing relevant studies, collecting and analyzing data, and writing a draft of the dissertation.

After completing the specialty paper, and normally during the fourth or fifth year of graduate study, the student, in consultation with his or her advisor, submits a list of four or more proposed PhD committee members to the faculty of the Social program. At least four members of the committee, including the major advisor, must be members of the Graduate Faculty, and at least one committee member must hold a primary appointment in another department at Pitt or at another university. At least two committee members must be core members of the Social program.

The remainder of the procedures for the PhD dissertation are identical to those for the Master's thesis, with the following exceptions:

- There is no page limit for the prospectus or final document.
- The PhD committee must meet at least once each year between the proposal and defense dates.
- Prior to meeting with the committee for the final defense, the student gives a 45-minute presentation that has been advertised to the university community, followed by a question period.
- The PhD degree is not awarded until the student has received approval for any modifications of the dissertation and has successfully completed all other requirements described above.
- The student must complete all requirements for the PhD degree within 10 years of enrolling in graduate school (or within eight years if the student received credit for a Master's degree obtained at another institution).

Advising and Mentoring

Upon admission, each student is assigned a faculty advisor in the Social program based on the apparent fit between the student's and faculty member's research interests. During their first year, students are expected to spend a substantial amount of time conducting research supervised by their advisor. Typically this involvement evolves into a Master's project under the advisor's supervision. In some cases, however, divergent interests or stylistic differences cause a student to desire to change advisors (either before or after the Master's thesis). Students are free to make such changes contingent on the willingness of a new advisor to adopt this role. The program chair and the department ombudsman are available to help resolve any advising problems that may arise. (For information on faculty advising responsibilities and resolution of problems with advisors, see relevant sections of the Department of Psychology Graduate Student Handbook.)

Shortly after entering the program, each student is assigned a three-person mentoring committee composed of faculty with primary appointments in the Psychology Department. The committee is composed of the student's advisor and two other faculty selected in light of the student's research interests. One of these latter members serves as chair of the committee. The composition of the committee may change during the student's graduate career as a function of shifts in student interests and faculty availability. The committee meets with the student at least once a year to discuss course selection, research activities, training opportunities, and progress in meeting program, departmental, and university deadlines. (For departmental deadlines, see "Departmental Policies on Requirements for Satisfactory and Expected Progress Towards Degree.")

Undergraduate Teaching

Because many students go on to academic careers that require teaching skills, students are required to assume responsibility for teaching an undergraduate course at least once during their graduate career. This teaching is supervised and evaluated by a faculty teaching mentor, and students are also encouraged to seek advice from other faculty and students with expertise relevant to the course they will teach. To help them prepare for teaching, students are required to take a department-sponsored teaching course (Psy 2970). In addition, each time they teach, students are required to have their course evaluated by the Office of Measurement and Evaluation of Teaching. Copies of course evaluations should be submitted as part of the student's annual self report and are reviewed by the student's mentoring committee as well as the program faculty.

Professional Development

Besides talking with their advisors about professional and career issues, students have an opportunity to attend departmental presentations on such topics as grant preparation, job searches, and family-work balance. In addition, selected program brown bags are devoted to related issues. Students are also encouraged to present their work in brown bags and at professional meetings, to submit papers to journals, to apply for fellowships and grants, and to develop a record of success in teaching.

Evaluation

In the spring of each year, students' past performance and future goals are evaluated by the social faculty, with input from mentoring committee members outside the program, if any. Prior to this meeting, students are asked to submit a self-report containing information about their work during the past year and their plans for the coming year, as well as supporting material. Following the meeting, students receive an evaluation letter from the program chair recognizing accomplishments, identifying potential problems, suggesting useful courses of action, and specifying consequences for unresolved problems.

In evaluating students, program faculty use (a) the program-specific criteria set forth in this document and (b) the department-wide criteria set forth in the document titled, "Departmental Policies on Requirements for Satisfactory and Expected Progress Towards Degree."

In addition, students are asked to submit a report of their progress to the Director of Graduate Studies in the Psychology Department. The Director then sends a letter indicating students' progress in meeting the criteria in the document titled, "Departmental Policies on Requirements for Satisfactory and Expected Progress Towards Degree."

Remedies for Inadequate Progress

Depending on circumstances, a student who is failing to meet program, departmental, or university requirements can be placed on provisional status, denied departmental funding, or terminated from the PhD program.

***Important:** This document does not contain detailed information about many departmental and university policies. Students are responsible for obtaining necessary information (much of which is contained in the Department of Psychology Graduate Student Handbook) and adhering to all relevant policies. The Departmental Graduate Secretary can be helpful in this regard.

Revised August 2019