

GUIDE TO THE PH.D. PROGRAM IN PUBLIC POLICY

For Doctoral Students

Pursuing PhDs or Receiving Funding from the
Graduate Field of Public Policy

Cornell University

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1. Introduction

The multi-disciplinary [faculty in the Field of Public Policy](#) work with graduate students in the Public Policy Ph.D. program and with graduate students in the Ph.D. programs in Economics, Sociology, Government, and other fields. This guide is for doctoral students receiving funding from the Brooks School of Public Policy, regardless of their Graduate Field of study. This guide supplements but does not replace the [Code of Legislation of the Cornell Graduate School](#), which is the definitive source for information on Ph.D. requirements and policies.

At Cornell, there is both the Brooks School of Public Policy and a Graduate Field of Public Policy. The School and Graduate Field have different but overlapping missions and faculty. The Brooks School of Public Policy's mission includes undergraduate and graduate education, research, and public engagement. The Graduate Field's mission is narrower: PhD education. At Cornell, a Graduate Field is defined as “a group of graduate faculty members who have come together around common academic interests”—in Public Policy's case, an interest in the study of public policy. All faculty in the Brooks School of Public Policy are in the Graduate Field of Public Policy. Additionally, faculty from many other departments at Cornell (e.g. Economics, Sociology, Communication) are also members of the Graduate Field of Public Policy.

The Graduate School at Cornell has a [webpage that provides links to a wide variety of important resources](#) concerning teaching, fellowships, disability services, career services, and diversity and inclusion. [All graduate school forms may be downloaded here.](#)

2. Requirements of the Ph.D. in Public Policy

2.1 Overview of the Program of Study

The Public Policy Ph.D. program combines PhD-level training in a social science discipline (e.g., Economics, Sociology, Government), empirical research methods, and concentrated study in a substantive policy area of focus, such as data science and technology policy; environmental and sustainability policy; health policy; human security; inequality and social policy; politics and economics of development; and race, racism, and public policy.

The Ph.D. degree is designed to train students for research careers; this includes positions as faculty in a variety of academic units and non-academic positions in think tanks, government, or private-sector consulting. [A list of placements \(first jobs\) of Public Policy Ph.D. graduates is available here.](#)

During their first two years, Ph.D. students take courses that cover disciplinary theory, methodological foundations of policy analysis, and provide depth in a policy area of interest. The exact set of courses is determined based on student preparation and interest and with the guidance of the Director of Graduate Studies (initially) and the student's special committee (in subsequent years). Graduate students are required by Cornell to enroll in a minimum of 12 credits each semester in their first two years.

All Public Policy Ph.D. students are required to write a second-year paper. This is an empirical paper, structured like a journal article, of sufficient quality and contribution that it could be publishable and part of the eventual dissertation. It may be co-authored with faculty but should be led by the student. Although students work on this paper during their second year (and thus this is called the "second year paper requirement"), it is actually due on December 15th of their third year. The student's committee chair is responsible for overseeing and approving the second-year paper. If the chair is not available due to sabbatical or other leave, another committee member may serve in this role.

By the third year, students should be working on their dissertation research.

Every year, each student's performance is reviewed by the special committee and field faculty and they determine whether the student's progress has been satisfactory. The Public Policy field requires:

- a grade of B or better in each course taken to meet a Public Policy PhD requirement
- required courses be taken in a timely manner
- adherence to the [Code of Academic Integrity](#)
- satisfactory attendance at a seminar series
- satisfactory performance as a TA or RA
- satisfactory progress of milestones towards the Ph.D. degree

Normally, Ph.D. degree candidates take five years of full-time study, although rarely people have graduated in four years, and six years is not uncommon. Keep in mind that each student is guaranteed six years of funding; funding may be available after that but it is not guaranteed. To receive funding beyond the 6th year, students must secure an external fellowship, an RAship funded by a faculty member, or a TAship in Public Policy or another department (note that students in years one through six receive priority for TA placements in Public Policy). All requirements for the doctoral degree must be completed within seven years of the first registration in the degree program.

2.2 Major and Minor Subjects, Concentrations

The Graduate School requires all Cornell Ph.D. students to choose a major subject and two minor subjects. For each major and minor subject, students also choose a concentration, which is a specialized area within the subject. Public policy is the only major subject and concentration within the Field of Public Policy.

Many of your committee members will be members of not only the Field of Public Policy but also Economics, Sociology, and/or Public Affairs, and you can choose concentrations from any Field with which each committee member is associated. Here is the [list of concentrations associated with faculty in the Field of Economics](#), the [list of concentrations associated with faculty in the Field of Sociology](#), and the [list of concentrations associated with faculty in the Field of Government](#). When you choose your special committee you will choose from among the subjects and concentrations associated with the committee members. You should first choose your ideal committee and then select subjects and concentrations associated with those members. Here is the [list of all subjects and concentrations](#) by graduate field.

2.3 The Special Committee

The Ph.D. student's graduate program is supervised by their Special Committee. When a student is admitted, the Director of Graduate Studies serves, temporarily, as the chair of their special committee, which at that time has no other members.

The Graduate School requires that all Ph.D. students must select their full Committee by the end of their third semester of study. The special committee consists of one faculty member representing the major area of study (Chair of Committee) and one faculty member for each of the two minor areas (Minor Members) the student has chosen. **The chair of the special committee must be a member of the graduate field of Public Policy if the student is in the Public Policy Ph.D. program.** The other two committee members can come from any graduate field at Cornell. It is recommended that students choose the chair first and then choose the other members in consultation with the new chair. When deciding on the membership of your special committee, you may wish to review the [list of the faculty in the Graduate Field of Public Policy](#). Special committees can have more than three members, but more than four is discouraged.

A faculty member at another university could serve on the special committee as a minor member, subject to the approval of the Dean of the Graduate School. External committee members are in addition to the three required Cornell faculty on the special committee (i.e., you must have three Cornell faculty even if you have someone external to Cornell on your committee).

Prior to the A Exam, students may change the membership of their Special Committee if their academic interests change. Changes must be approved by the new membership of the Special Committee and the DGS. After passing the A Exam, students may not change the membership of their Special Committee, except with approval of the Dean of the Graduate School. Students who cannot constitute a full committee cannot continue in the program. The DGS, at their discretion, may designate a Field-appointed member to the special committee of any Public Policy Ph.D. student.

The members of the Special Committee set course requirements, supervise and determine whether students pass or fail their A Exam (proposal of dissertation research) and B Exam (defense of dissertation research), advise them on their progress towards degree and general professional development. [For more information on special committees, and for the link to establish or change the membership of your special committee, click here.](#)

2.4 A Exam and B Exam

The Graduate School requires that Ph.D. students pass two examinations: a comprehensive Admission to Candidacy ("A" Exam), taken after the student has taken at least two semesters (but generally four) of coursework; and a final examination ("B" exam), given after completion of the doctoral dissertation. The Special Committee conducts these examinations.

In the Field of Public Policy, the A Exam is the proposal of your dissertation research and may also involve questions regarding competency in coursework. **Students must pass their A Exam before the beginning of the fourth year.** It is possible to petition for an extension by the Graduate School (forms available [here](#)), but keep in mind that not all petitions are guaranteed to be granted, funding is not guaranteed after six years, and graduate study may not continue seven years past admission.

Students schedule exams with the Graduate School at least seven days in advance by submitting a [petition to schedule their A Exam](#) or [petition to schedule their B Exam](#). All members of the special committee are expected to attend all examinations. Exams should be scheduled so that all members of the Special Committee are available to participate in the exam. If a member cannot participate even remotely, it is possible for them to designate a proxy, but the chair of the committee may not designate a proxy – the chair must participate in all examinations.

A minimum of two full semesters must elapse between passing the A Exam and passing the B Exam. Cornell graduate school legislation requires that students must submit a complete draft of the dissertation to all members of the special committee six weeks before the final examination, and a final draft a minimum of five days before the final examination. More information about the graduate school timeline and requirements for the dissertation can be found [here](#). The B Exam (dissertation defense) must be scheduled and submitted by the Graduate School's deadlines in order for students to have their degrees conferred on time.

2.5 Annual Student Progress Reviews

Beginning in 2017, [the Cornell Graduate School requires that each year a student submit a Student Progress Review \(SPR\) Form](#), which must also be reviewed and approved with additional comments from their Special Committee chair. This is to ensure a regular exchange of written feedback between advisees and advisors. The SPR is also shared with the DGS. The graduate school offers the following [tips for students regarding the SPR form](#). The Graduate School sends out requests for students to complete the SPR form each Spring, and it must be completed by August 1st. Failure to complete the SPR by August 1st will result in a registration hold for the Fall. We encourage students to meet with their chairs to discuss the content of their SPR before they submit it. This is a good opportunity to receive feedback on your academic progress and also to discuss whether there is anything you would like to change about your mentoring relationship to support your academic success.

2.6 Responsible Conduct of Research Training

The Cornell Graduate School requires that all Cornell graduate students [successfully complete online courses in the Responsible Conduct of Research \(RCR\)](#) by the end of their second semester of enrollment.

2.7 Human Subjects in Research

All research projects that use human subjects must be reviewed and approved by the [Cornell University Institutional Review Board](#) (IRB) before the investigator may commence the study. All Cornell investigators, including graduate students, must complete [training in the use of human subjects](#) before submitting applications to the IRB for review. Only the IRB can designate a research project as exempt from review. All research involving human subjects must therefore be submitted to IRB for review. **Please note that the IRB considers some types of secondary data analysis to be research involving human subjects, and thus must be reviewed.** Refer to the [decisions trees](#) provided by the IRB to determine whether your proposed research must be reviewed. Students who are unsure whether their research qualifies should contact the IRB for guidance. [Procedures, forms and required human subjects training are available here.](#)

2.8 Public Policy Requirements for Special and Terminal Master's Degree

On the recommendation of the special committee, a master's degree may be awarded

after a doctoral student has passed the A Exam.

On the recommendation of the special committee, a terminal master's degree may be awarded to a doctoral student who is withdrawing from the doctoral program but who has successfully completed all coursework, spent four semesters in the program, and received a master's level pass on their A Exam.

2.9 Procedure for Transferring from Public Policy to Economics

In some cases, Public Policy students wish to transfer to the PhD program in Economics. There is no guarantee that Economics will accept transfer students, but to be potentially eligible Public Policy students must: 1) take the full first year sequence in economics and receive at least a B- in each of those courses; 2) sit for the Q Exams and receive at least a Pass-; and 3) fill out a petition for a transfer, typically at the end of the 1st year summer after receiving results of the Q Exams. Please note that Public Policy students are not automatically able to enroll in the first year sequence in economics; permission is required from the professor teaching the course.

3. Teaching Assistantships, Research Assistantships, and Other Financial Aid

3.1 Graduate Assistantships: Teaching and Research

Teaching Assistantships (TA) and Research Assistantships (RA) are normally awarded for a nine-month period. Assistantships provide a tuition waiver, health insurance, and a stipend; they require a work commitment of 15-20 hours per week including January intersession (unless other arrangements have been made with the supervisor). Students may work for pay no more than 20 hours per week if they are full-time students. This includes work as a TA, RA, and other employment.

Note that the start date of TA and RA positions is usually several weeks before the first day of classes. TAs and RAs are expected to be in Ithaca and ready to work by the start date listed in their appointment letter, unless they have made an explicit alternative agreement with the faculty with whom they will be working.

TA assignments are made by the Director of Graduate Studies in the semester before the course is to be taught. A TA application is required every semester. The Graduate Field Assistant will email the application to you around mid-October for the spring semester and mid-March for the fall semester. You must complete this application to be assigned a TAship.

RA appointments are made by individual faculty who have the resources to support them and can be made at any time.

Continued financial support is contingent upon academic performance, academic integrity, progress towards degree, and satisfactory completion of TA or RA duties.

The Cornell graduate student assistantships policy is available here:
Web link: <https://gradschool.cornell.edu/policies/assistantships/>
PDF: https://www.dfa.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/policy/vol1_3.pdf

3.2 Reporting Title IX Violations, Recognizing Students in Distress

TAs are required to consult with a Title IX Coordinator if they become aware of an alleged incident of sexual or related misconduct; please see [Cornell's Title IX webpage](#). Here is a [handout summarizing Cornell staff and faculty duty to consult](#) with the Title IX office if they become aware of a possible incident. The Title IX office also offers [online trainings](#) to help students recognize workplace misconduct.

Mental health is central to students' personal and academic wellbeing, and many students at all levels face mental health challenges. Cornell has many resources available for students who

are struggling with their mental health. Please review [Cornell's information on recognizing and responding to students in distress](#) in the course of TA duties. [Resources](#) are also available specifically for graduate students.

3.3 Resources to Improve Your Teaching

Public Policy and Cornell take very seriously our responsibility to provide a high-quality education at all levels. TAs play an important role in undergraduate education. Moreover, many graduate students will apply for faculty positions that include a teaching appointment, and part of graduate education is learning how to teach well and succeed in such jobs.

Cornell offers numerous resources for graduate students to enhance their teaching skills. [Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation](#) offers the [GET SET](#) program – a workshop series and a way for you to receive certification of your training in certain areas of teaching. It also offers an [International Teaching Assistant Program](#) to assist graduate students for whom English is a second language. Additionally, the [English Language Support Office \(ELSO\)](#) offers important writing and speaking resources for international students, including one-one tutoring, seminars, and writing consultations.

Public Policy does not ask graduate students to serve as lecturers, teaching an entire course on their own. However, if students wish to gain such experience (e.g. because they plan to apply to liberal arts colleges and want more teaching experience), they may discuss with their special committee and the DGS the potential of teaching during either Cornell's brief [winter session](#) or [summer session](#). Students and the special committee should carefully consider whether such teaching would enhance their job opportunities or take too much time away from research.

3.4 Evaluation of TA Performance, TA Awards, TA Improvement Plans

After each semester, the DGS reviews the performance of each Teaching Assistant (TA). Performance reviews are based on student course evaluations (both numeric scoring and open-ended responses) and the feedback of the faculty teaching the course.

3.4.1 TA Awards. Outstanding performance by TAs is recognized with TA Awards. These are based on the same criteria listed above – student course evaluations and faculty feedback – and the enrollment and difficulty of TAing the course (e.g., teaching sections, enrollment size) are taken into account. The purposes of the award are to recognize and incentivize outstanding work by teaching assistants, and to signal to potential employers that the recipients are high quality teachers.

3.4.2 TA Improvement Plans. If, based on the criteria listed above, a student's teaching needs improvement, they may be put on probation and given a plan to rectify the shortcomings identified in the evaluation review. This could include taking courses from the [Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation](#) to improve teaching skills, courses from the [International Teaching](#)

[Assistant Program](#) to improve fluency, and/or other approaches appropriate to rectify the limitations. If TA performance does not improve during the probationary semester, the student may no longer be offered TA positions or be guaranteed funding. In extreme cases of misconduct or failure to perform the minimal duties, a TA may be removed immediately without a probationary period.

3.5 Revocation/Termination of Assistantships

Public Policy typically offers incoming Ph.D. students a multi-year commitment of financial support. Financial support is not guaranteed after six years. RA or fellowship support replaces the guaranteed TA support (i.e., one cannot bank semesters of TA support while one is on an RAship or fellowship). Semesters of support given up during a leave of absence do not automatically carry forward to future years after the leave.

Support through departmental teaching assistantships can be revoked by the DGS on the following grounds:

- unsatisfactory performance as a teaching assistant
- failure to pass the second-year paper requirement
- unsatisfactory academic performance in the Ph.D. student's Graduate Field
- inability to form a Special Committee with at least three members
- failure to attain English proficiency after 2 semesters of support
- unsatisfactory compliance with academic integrity policies

TA performance is evaluated as described in the previous section. Academic performance is judged based on input of the Director of Graduate Studies of the student's Graduate Field of study and the Special Committee. Failure to attain English proficiency is judged based on input of the [International Teaching Assistant Development Program](#) and student evaluations. Compliance with academic integrity policies is judged based on input from the faculty and the [Graduate School Academic Integrity Hearing Board](#).

Normally, if the DGS is considering revoking support on one or more of these grounds, the student will be notified and placed on probation for one semester. If performance during the probationary period is still unsatisfactory, the student's support will be revoked. However, under extreme circumstances of misconduct or failure to fulfill minimal duties, the assistantship may be terminated during the semester; if that occurs, any future years of support are also revoked.

3.6 Summer Support

If summer support is not guaranteed in your offer letter, summer funding via RAships for Public Policy-based graduate students are available on a competitive basis. These funds are available to Ph.D. students in the Graduate Field of Public Policy and to Ph.D. students who are funded by the Brooks School of Public Policy. To be eligible for this type of support students must find a faculty member who agrees to hire them for the summer and who agrees to provide matching funds.

Students should submit an application that includes (a) the name of the faculty member who has agreed to hire the student; (b) an outline of what will be accomplished during the summer; and (c) a description of how the proposed work fits into the student's graduate education. The application should be no longer than 1 page. **The deadline for applications for summer support is April 15.** Applications should be submitted through the Public Policy GFA.

3.7 Travel Funds

3.7.1. Graduate School Travel Fund

[The Graduate School offers Conference Grants \(up to \\$700\) and Research Travel Grants \(up to \\$2,000\)](#) to provide for graduate student travel, food and lodging. The conference grant funding is intended to help finance student's attendance at professionally recognized or academically relevant meetings for the purpose of presenting papers or participating in an equivalent professional or academic activity. Students should always apply for the graduate school funding before applying to the Field of Public Policy. The Graduate School research travel grants are for student travel that is related to conducting research (not for conference travel).

3.7.2. Field of Public Policy Travel Funds

Public Policy-based graduate students can request funds from the Field for travel expenses to professional conferences. Students should first seek funding from the Graduate School and then after it is exhausted, they may apply to Public Policy. These funds are available to Ph.D. students in the Graduate Field of Public Policy and to Ph.D. students in other Graduate Fields if they are funded by the Brooks School of Public Policy.

Students are eligible to receive up to \$500 per year in total; this may be used for a single conference or multiple conferences until that limit is reached. The funding cycle runs from August 1st through July 31st of each year. To apply, [students should fill out the application form here](#), which requires information about the conference, type(s) of presentation(s) student will make, professional relevance, cost effectiveness (i.e. evidence that the student is endeavoring to minimize costs), and student's academic progress and academic integrity in the PhD program. If the student is not presenting at the conference and only attending, s/he must make a compelling case for the professional importance of the conference and what professional development/networking activities will be pursued.

Students may apply for funding as soon as they have registered for the conference, and must apply within one month after the conference. Once the application has been submitted, the DGS will review the application and render a funding decision based on the aforementioned criteria. Successful applicants will have the approved funding amount deposited into their Bursar account.

4. Student Well-Being

Public Policy and Cornell value our students' mental and physical health and want to ensure that students maintain proper balance to facilitate success in graduate school and in future careers. This section discusses resources offered to help protect and enhance student health and well-being.

4.1 Title IX Complaints / Sexual Harassment or Misconduct

Cornell and the Public Policy Ph.D. program are committed to providing a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment and will not tolerate sexual harassment or misconduct. Here is the [webpage for Cornell's Title IX office](#), which enforces these policies. You can [click here to make a report to Cornell of harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, or other sexual misconduct](#). Here is a [list of other resources and options for reporting](#).

4.2 Bias and Discrimination

Again, Public Policy and Cornell are committed to a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment, and thus will not tolerate bias or discrimination. You can [report bias incidents and related concerns here](#) or by emailing Report_Bias@cornell.edu. [Cornell graduate school's resources regarding diversity and inclusion are available here](#). Cornell also has an [Office of Inclusion and Student Engagement \(OISE\)](#) that helps recruit and retain a diverse student body. Here is the link for [Cornell's LGBT Resource Center](#).

4.3 Emotional and Mental Health

Graduate school can be a stressful and isolating experience and it is common for graduate students to seek counseling and to speak with others about strategies for ensuring their mental and emotional health. The [Cornell Health Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) is available if students wish to speak with them: 607-255-5155. Here is a [longer list of resources](#) available for help and support. [Cornell Health](#) offers integrated medical and mental health services to students.

4.4 Disability Services

Our commitment to an inclusive learning environment includes accommodation for student needs. Here is the [link to Student Disability Services](#), which helps develop plans for student accommodation. Additionally, the Director of Graduate Studies is always open to hear about suggestions for how to make the Public Policy PhD program more accessible and inclusive.

4.5 Leave of Absence

Some students take a leave of absence, effectively putting a temporary pause on their graduate studies. Please see the Cornell Graduate School's [Code of Legislation](#) for university policies regarding leaves of absence for personal or health reasons. Also see this [page devoted to leaves of absence](#). Please discuss with your special committee chair and the DGS any plans you may be considering for a leave of absence. Forms to [petition for a health leave of absence, a leave of absence for reasons other than health are available here](#).

4.6 Parental Accommodation

Cornell University graduate students are eligible for parental accommodation to help balance the competing demands of academic and family life. [More information about eligibility and benefits are available here](#). [Information about the Cornell Child Care Center can be found here](#). There are many supports within the Cornell community for students with children. Visit our [Students with Families website](#) for more information.

4.6 Working in Absentia

A leave of absence is taken when the student will not be making progress towards their degree. In contrast, if the student is away from Ithaca (specifically, more than 100 miles away) but is still making the necessary progress towards their degree under the close supervision of their special committee (e.g. for field work or other dissertation research) then the student may change their status to in absentia. [More information](#), including the [in absentia petition](#), are available online.

Students should be very cautious about working for an extended period away from campus; it is difficult for the special committee to provide the same level of feedback, interaction, and supervision when a student is living away from campus. Students in absentia also have fewer opportunities to keep up with innovations in the field and forgo networking opportunities by attending seminars and meeting with visitors. There is also the risk that progress may stall when one leaves a more structured environment and is away from graduate student peers. In absentia status should only be sought with the counsel and approval of the special committee.

5. Schedule of Progress towards Degree

- Year 1: core coursework in disciplinary theory, research methods, and subject area of research
- End of 2nd semester: [successfully complete online courses in the Responsible Conduct of Research \(RCR\)](#)
- Year 2: continue core coursework in disciplinary theory, research methods, and subject area of research
- End of 3rd semester (i.e. halfway through Year 2): full [Special Committee](#) must be finalized. Here is a [link to the online portal to select or change your committee](#).
- Year 3, December 15: deadline for approval of your 2nd Year Paper by your Special Committee chair
- Before beginning of 7th semester (i.e. before start of Year 4): deadline for passing your [A Exam](#) (dissertation proposal). Here is the [petition to schedule the A Exam](#).
- Year 6, end: deadline for passing your [B Exam](#) (dissertation defense). Here is the [petition to schedule the B Exam](#). A minimum of two full semesters must elapse between passing the A Exam and passing the B Exam. Guaranteed funding from the Field ends after six years.
- Year 7, end: all degree requirements must be completed.

[All graduate school forms \(e.g. to form a committee or schedule an A Exam or B Exam\) may be downloaded here.](#)