Guidelines for CRP PhD Students and their Advisors

General Timeline and Funding
Most CRP PhD students have four years of guaranteed funding, which can be used over five years. Renewal of financial support each year is contingent upon satisfactory academic performance and progress toward degree completion. An annual Student Progress Report (SPR), monitoring PhD student progress, is conducted each spring by the Graduate School after the first year where students and the chair provide evidence of satisfactory progress. The SPR is reviewed by the Director of Graduate Studies. This Student Progress Report asks students and the chair to review the student’s recent accomplishments, identify challenges and set goals. In the case of unsatisfactory progress, or failure to form a committee, the Field may vote to dismiss the student.

Work expectations and timeline for the PhD is:

Year 1: Take course work, create “special committee,” including identifying chairperson and two “minor” members, at least one of whom must be from an outside field, and start to articulate potential research/dissertation topic.

Year 2: Take further courses as recommended by the special committee, hold “A” Exam, draft dissertation research proposal, and plan for field work (including plans for raising an additional year of funding if field work is needed for the project).

Year 3 (and 4 if a year of field work is needed): Conduct fieldwork and further research. Begin writing dissertation

Year 4 (and/or 5 if field work took a year): Write Dissertation, go on the job market, hold “B” Exam

If a fifth year of funding is needed, the student, with their chair’s support, should identify and apply for external funding. Some students will raise grants to cover their field work and may plan to be away from campus during that time. If so, the student will go “in absentia” and will only pay $200/semester in tuition. For students working in the US, they must be 100 miles from Ithaca in order to go “in absentia.” Foreign students must be full-time students to maintain their student visa — thus the “in absentia” option, while in the US, is not available to them, but it can be used for conducting field work overseas. As a general rule, the college will contribute a 50% tuition match for graduate students who have the rest of their package (50% tuition, stipend, health insurance) funded by an external grant.

Neither the chair nor the student should expect Department or Graduate School funding beyond the five-year window in which the four years of guaranteed funding is available.

Grad school requirements for timelines are found here.
https://finaid.cornell.edu/policies/federal-satisfactory-academic-progress

The key milestones for doctoral students include:

- Complete the responsible conduct of research (RCR) training prior to the end of the second semester.
- Form the special committee prior to the end of the third semester (preferably, the second).
- Complete the examination for admission to candidacy (“A exam”) prior to the start of the seventh semester (preferably the fifth).

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1The Stein Institute may be able to match grants raised by PhD students up to $10,000 for field work. There should be another source already committing an equal or greater amount to that being requested from the Stein Institute. The maximum funds available to any individual student is $10,000 and will not pay for tuition (students doing field work will be in absentia, so tuition is not required). As is the case for all applications to the Stein Institute, the nature of the work being supported must fall within the interests of the Institute as outlined on its website. https://aap.cornell.edu/academics/crp/stein-institute Applications should follow the guidelines found there as well.
• Complete the dissertation defense ("B exam") prior to the end of the fourteenth semester (The 14th semester is a Graduate School hard deadline. CRP PhDs should complete at the end of the 8th semester or 10th semester if doing field work)
• In the second year and beyond, complete the Student Progress Review (SPR) form annually and receive a rating of “satisfactory” or “excellent.”

Teaching Assistantships and Teaching
Most students receive a combination of fellowship funding (when they work on their research) and Teaching Assistantships, when they work 15 hours/week helping to teach, lead discussion groups, advise students and grade papers. TAships are important opportunities to gain experience working closely to support a faculty member in a course. All PhD students should be prepared to be a teaching assistant for any course in the undergrad or graduate core (theory, qualitative and quantitative methods). Students may be asked to TA a course outside their comfort zone. This is an opportunity for learning.

Occasionally an advanced PhD student will be invited to teach a course, e.g. a freshman writing seminar or GIS or a summer course. This is excellent preparation for the job market. This is determined by the Department Chair in consultation with the DGS and the student’s advisor.

Committee Formation
At Cornell, each doctoral student has the responsibility and opportunity to assemble a “special committee” (their doctoral supervisors) themselves. That special committee, under the leadership of the committee chair, then has the primary responsibility for supporting and developing the student’s independence in scholarship. The committee sets the standards for what is required to pass the A and B exams. Students should meet with their chair regularly, and their minor members at least once a semester. It is important that the student and the chair develop a shared expectation agreement during the first year and continue conversations about expectations as the student progresses. It is useful to put these shared expectations in writing. This agreement should reflect the student’s understanding of the advisor’s expectations for their work and, also, the advisor’s commitment toward the student’s education. This agreement helps establish a mutual understanding of accountability.

All PhDs must have a minimum of three special committee members – a chair and two minor members. When a student is admitted the DGS assigns an initial advisor and a potential minor member, also within CRP, who were identified during the admissions process. The student should meet with both individuals to assess their possible roles on the student’s committee. Changes typically occur because the question of who shall serve on the student’s special committee is the choice and prerogative of the student. However, the initially assigned advisors will guide the student until the student formally creates their committee. Each doctoral student should identify their chair, who must be a member of the CRP faculty, as well as two minor members of their committee no later than the end of their third semester. If a student fails to form a complete committee by the end of the fourth semester, they will be dismissed from the program.

One minor member must represent a field outside the field of City and Regional Planning, but this could still be a CRP faculty representing a different field, as most CRP faculty are members of multiple fields. Some students chose four members, but this should be done with care: it can increase future work (an extra A exam section, and another member to satisfy and schedule). Many faculty are happy to give advice informally without being officially added to a doctoral “special committee.” Graduate students may invite researchers or scholars from outside Cornell to join their special committees as ad hoc members, but these ad hoc members serve in addition to the required three regular members. Students may petition for an exception to any rule but, the Graduate School’s clear expectation is that Cornell faculty are ultimately responsible for guiding and supervising Cornell doctoral students.
In rare instances, a student may add or change a committee member after the A exam. If so, the new member must either accept the A exam or request a new one. If a student changes a committee member after the A exam, this must occur at least 90 days before the B exam defense. In situations where a committee member leaves, is unresponsive or not working out, the student has the option to replace them. But the committee change process has to follow Graduate School rules.

The Graduate School has an advising guide for PhD students that should be consulted for helpful advice. https://gradschool.cornell.edu/academic-progress/advising-guide-for-research-students-2020/

It also has guidance regarding deadlines. https://gradschool.cornell.edu/academic-progress/thesis-dissertation/

All required forms can be found here. https://gradschool.cornell.edu/forms/

**Course Work**

Coursework for the PhD is decided between the student and their committee and is tied both to prior preparation and the research topic the student wishes to pursue. If a student is coming in without a Master degree in planning, coursework that includes the graduate MRP core (5130, 5190, and 5250) is strongly recommended. Minor members on committees often have additional expectations, which may include taking specific courses. Given these reasons, students should finalize their committee as soon as possible.

The department offers PhD Advanced Theory Courses in alternate fall semesters and a PhD Research Design course in alternate spring semesters that we strongly encourage all CRP PhD students to take. A PhD Proseminar is organized each term by PhD students. We suggest participating in the proseminar and department colloquia. These courses help build the PhD cohort and provide a common foundation for all students—but they do not suffice to provide theoretical grounding for most dissertations. More specialized courses appropriate to each student’s research must be identified in careful consultation with the student’s special committee members. Students typically take other theory and methods courses in CRP and in other departments across campus.

Students should plan to finish course work by the end of their second year and hold their A exam. Taking additional courses beyond the second year may delay research progress and should be discouraged except in special circumstances.

For most students, the first year of the program is a recruitment fellowship year, which brings no additional TA or RA requirements. This is very precious time which should not be wasted. In addition to courses, the student should be meeting faculty whom they might invite to serve on the special committee.

**Preparing for the Future**

Most PhDs go on to academic careers. Some go into NGOs, international agencies, the private sector or government. Work experience, outside of academia, is valued by all employers and students should try to get “real world” experience before or during their program. Students should also avail themselves of opportunities to practice professional skills. This includes presenting at conferences. This should be done each year and the Department and Grad School have funding to support attendance at conferences when a PhD student is presenting a paper. Applying for external funding is important, not just for the money, but also for the learning experience of how to write a grant and negotiate the proposal process through all the layers of bureaucracy. Publishing is critical and it is recommended that the student work on a publishable paper early in their career so they will have publications before they go on the job market. Such papers can be written with their advisor or another faculty member to learn the craft of journal article writing. Papers outside of the dissertation help show intellectual breadth.
**A Exam**

The A Exam is an admission to candidacy exam, and passing it shows the student is ready for PhD study. It indicates that course work is complete, the committee is in place, and a proposal for the dissertation is written. Students should aim to take their A exams in their second year. Students who do not complete their A exams by the end of their third year will not receive summer funding, and if they do not complete the A exam prior to the start of the seventh semester they will not receive their Sage Dissertation Fellowship funding and will be put on probation by the Graduate School.

The A exam must be schedule with the Graduate School 7 days in advance. See https://gradschool.cornell.edu/forms/ for form.

In CRP, the A exam has two parts: written and oral. In preparation for the written part, the student typically works with each individual committee member on an agreed-on area of scholarship on which they will be examined. A exam formats for the written part are decided by the student and their committee. The format may take the form of timed essays (written in a week or two), or they can be more open ended – completed over several months. A exam questions are designed to demonstrate the student’s competency in the field of planning (especially for students interested in academic careers in planning), in the student’s topical fields of study, and help to form the foundation for the dissertation.

In addition to the written A exam questions, the student typically writes a full proposal for their dissertation research. The timing of the proposal is coordinated with the committee and student. Sometimes, the committee will want a draft proposal before submitting their A exam questions to the candidate. In other committees, the student might write the full proposal after the submission and approval of the written portion of the A exam. All written A exams and the proposal are shared with the entire committee at least one week prior to scheduling the Oral A exam.

The Oral A exam has the following parts.

Part 1: Committee members meet to discuss work without the student.
Part 2: Committee members discuss A Exam answers with the student.
Part 3: Discussion will shift to the dissertation proposal
Part 4: The student will leave, as the committee deliberates exam results.
Part 5: Student returns, and any recommendations are shared by the committee.

In CRP, students rarely undertake A exams if their committee is not certain that they will be successful. On occasion, if a student receives a conditional pass, the committee chair must provide, in writing, explicit detail on revisions required and a timeline (which is sent to the student, the minor members, the Graduate School and the GFA). The oral A exam is not repeated. On the very rare occasion that a student does not pass, the oral A exam has to be repeated after the student has completed more work, as specified by the committee chair.

**Staying in Touch with the Committee**

While the A exam proposal sets the stage for future research, rarely does the final dissertation follow the proposal exactly. While there are no requirements for full Committee meetings between the A and B exams, it is recommended that students stay in regular touch with their committee chairs and members to let them how the research is progressing. Students are also strongly encouraged to work closely with their committee chair and members as they prepare written drafts of the dissertation. Surprises at the defense are risky and not recommended.
B Exam Defense

The chair, in consultation with the student and the committee, determines when the student is ready to defend. The expectation is that all committee members will have read the full dissertation before the defense. The defense-ready draft of the dissertation should be complete, in thesis format, with all elements (abstract to bibliography). According to the Code of Legislation of the Graduate School [https://gradschool.cornell.edu/policies/code-of-legislation/] the defense-ready version of the dissertation should be provided to the committee members six weeks prior to the B exam, unless the committee agrees to a shorter review time.

The B exam must be scheduled 7 days in advance with the Grad School. See forms at [https://gradschool.cornell.edu/forms/]

The PhD defense begins typically with greetings to the student after which the student is asked to step outside so the committee members can meet privately to discuss their particular readings of the student’s work. The chair solicits concerns from each minor member, and the committee members discuss the student’s work and note what questions they would like to explore in the examination. This allows the committee members to get on the same page, and it sets the stage for the defense. Because minor members can come from diverse fields, there may be differing concerns and expectations. It is important that the committee be clear before the defense begins. This initial part of the meeting usually takes 20 minutes or more.

Next the student is invited back into the room to make a short presentation (perhaps 10-20 minutes; students should practice these presentations beforehand to allow ample time for committee discussion). The subsequent discussion (often 60 minutes or more) with the committee members follows. Typically, these examinations are far more like “serious conversations about the research at hand” than they are any form of “interrogations.”

Then the student is asked to leave the room again so the committee members can discuss what revisions will be required (approx. 15 minutes). When the student returns, the Chair specifies the revisions that need to be made. At that point the minor members are often asked if they want to sign off on the dissertation at that time or wait to see and approve the revisions. Some minor members will sign off at the defense and just have the chair review and approve final revisions. When they are, there is an extra burden on the chair to write a memo (to send to the Graduate School, the student, the minor members and the GFA) specifying exactly what revisions are required in order for the work to reach the level of pass.

Most dissertations will require revisions, and a student can pass with major revisions. Conditional passes are to be used in only very rare circumstances. When they are, there is an extra burden on the chair to write a memo (to send to the Graduate School, the student, the minor members and the GFA) specifying exactly what revisions are required in order for the work to reach the level of pass.

The Graduate School requires that revisions be completed within 60 days. This can be a challenge for some students, and the Graduate school will allow more time if the student writes a request.

The student should submit the revised thesis to the committee members BEFORE sending the final document to the Grad School. The student should include a cover email telling the committee members where to find the revisions (or highlighting them) so they can find them quickly. Once each member has approved the revisions, then the student can submit the final pdf to the Grad School. Once the student submits the pdf to the Grad School, the committee members have 24 hours to approve the submitted copy electronically. So be sure to coordinate timing with the committee members.

Mentoring

Chairing a PhD student requires more than advising the dissertation. The Chair helps prepare the student for a future career as a PhD. This includes training in how to write journal articles and grants, as well as providing support once the student is on the job market. Mentoring, helping the student build networks, advising and reviewing job application materials and writing recommendation letters are all part of the job of the Chair. PhD students are often under great stress, and their Chair is the first source of support. It is important to be available to the student all year – even in summer when no faculty are on salary—because research work continues and students will reach out for advice and guidance. The chair also must be available to the student for advising and possible key exams (A or B) even if on leave or sabbatical. These are typical and essential duties of the chair. After the student leaves Cornell, the chair will still be called upon to provide mentoring advice in the early career stage and recommendation letters for future jobs. Thus, the PhD advisor has a long-term continuing relationship with the candidate.

The Dissertation

In CRP each doctoral student has the option of writing a monograph or three publishable papers. The faculty as a whole have no consensus about the desirability of one option over the other and the final format of the dissertation is decided by the student with their committee.

The monograph contains multiple related chapters which typically follow the form of: Introduction, Literature Review, Data and Method, Analysis (may be several chapters), and Conclusion. Students using historical or qualitative methods often choose the monograph option. While some students write monographs in the hope that they could turn their dissertations into a future book-length manuscript, many students will turn their monograph into several journal articles during their period of assistant professorship.

The standard for the three papers option includes the following:

1. The three papers should be thematically linked and reflect a trajectory of work with depth of inquiry in a common area.
2. Each paper must contribute significantly to new knowledge and be deemed publishable in a reputable refereed journal.
3. The material covered in the papers should not significantly overlap.

A three papers option dissertation should have a front chapter (or two) which includes the introduction to the topic, and an overall literature review that sets up the analysis for the three papers to follow. Each of the three papers should stand alone as a potential journal article and thus some literature review and data description could be similar across the papers. The dissertation may also have a final conclusion chapter that summarizes the body of research, policy implications and future research questions. It is helpful for students to think of the “umbrella” under which their three papers fit. Students should not choose the papers option because of difficulties selecting one topic. This can turn into a “three dissertation” option and delay the student another year or two. The three papers need to be substantially related.

Because all questions grow, keeping the dissertation within bounds is important. The dissertation stage should take a couple of years, after which the PhD candidate should move on with their career. Outstanding research
questions can be answered in future work. The dissertation is just a first exercise in learning how to conduct a comprehensive research project.

Co-authorship and Publication

Dissertation papers can be published before the defense. But the committee decides if they meet the standards for passing the B exam. If the committee wants revisions in a paper that is already published, the candidate will make revisions to satisfy the committee. Consistent with Graduate School guidelines, dissertation papers may be coauthored, typically with the chair or members of the committee, but this should be discussed with the chair and the committee beforehand and supported unanimously (for more information on Graduate School rules, see the section of the Code of Legislation of the Graduate Faculty titled “papers options”). Externally funded research will often produce coauthored work. The PhD student will need experience and confidence in writing sole authored work to build a profile for the future job market. All PhD students should be encouraged to publish and be mentored in that process.

Other useful resources:

Support for Conference Attendance and Travel
Graduate students are eligible to apply for support for conference travel and attendance. More information is available here: https://gradschool.cornell.edu/financial-support/travel-funding-opportunities/

The department also has a modest fund to support conference travel and attendance especially when the student is presenting their research. The student should contact the GFA for the department application form.