

SOCIAL WORK, PH.D.

PhD Program

The purpose of this program is to prepare social work scholars to advance social work knowledge. Coursework focuses on theory, research methods, and critical evaluation of social work policies and practice. In addition to coursework, students work with faculty members in research and/or teaching.

The PhD program builds on a base of professional knowledge and practice in social work. The program offers students the opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding in a selected area of concentration and, through the dissertation, contribute to knowledge development in that area. Students take electives in an area of personal interest. Upon enrollment in the program, students are assigned to a PhD faculty advisor for program planning and guidance.

The program is notable among social work PhD programs for the range and depth of its research foundation courses and electives. Exceptional opportunities are available for students interested in research in health, mental health, aging, and child welfare. There are opportunities for international experiences as well as for collaboration with the Center for Mental Health and Aging, the Institute for Rural Health Research, the Institute for Social Science Research, and the Youth Services Institute, other colleges and departments of the University; and with various units of The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB).

Time Limit

Although the UA Graduate School has established a nine-year time-to-degree deadline for PhD students, entering Social Work PhD students have a seven-year internal deadline to complete the degree. Students who reach Year 7 will be held accountable for reaching due dates and deadlines distributed each semester. If a student fails to meet a due date or deadline in Year 7, yet wants to pursue degree completion, the student must apply for an extension to the social work degree completion deadline.

Obtaining Information

Inquiries about the program and requests for application materials should be to: The University of Alabama School of Social Work, PhD Program Office, Box 870314, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0314; telephone 205-348-6528; bsmith2@sw.ua.edu.

Financial Aid

Financial aid is provided through graduate teaching and/or research assistantships, university fellowships, external dissertation grants and/or part-time employment.

Some additional scholarships are available from the School of Social Work including the Ben Avis Orcutt and Leslie J. Shellhase endowed scholarships, and the Social Work Board of Friends Summer Scholarships, which are administered by the PhD program. For more information on financial aid from other sources, visit the Financial Aid website.

Admissions

The School of Social Work determines eligibility for regular or "admission with permission to continue" admission primarily on the basis of previous academic records. Successful applicants must meet the minimum admission requirements of the Graduate School prior to consideration by the School of Social Work PhD Program.

School of Social Work PhD Program Admissions Requirements and Additional Information About Supporting Documentation:

- A master's degree in social work (MSW) or simultaneous separate applications to the UA MSW and PhD Programs to enter the Concurrent Program to work on the two degrees simultaneously.
- Letters from three references, one of whom must be a university professor or social work scholar who has personal knowledge of the applicant's intellectual and scholarly abilities. If the applicant has earned the MSW degree, at least one letter should be from a former instructor in the applicant's MSW program.
- A Statement of Purpose indicating the reasons the applicant wishes to pursue a PhD in social work and indicating the applicant's research interests. There is no standard length, generally, the statement ranges from 900 to 2,250 words in length.
- Evidence of scholarly writing ability, supported by evidence the applicant supplies (e.g., a sole-authored paper published in a journal or presented at a conference or workshop, a design of a service program or a research proposal, and/or a course syllabus written by the applicant).
- In addition to the above program requirements, it is recommended that the applicant also possess a minimum of two years of employment experience in social work after earning the MSW degree.

Applicants seeking admission to the program who do not meet the above requirements may be considered on an individual basis for "admission with permission to continue". If an applicant desires such consideration, he or she should file all application materials as directed above. In addition to the materials required of all students, they should file a petition for exemption from one or more requirements with the social work PhD Program Director. The petition should state the specific requirement from which exemption is sought and should provide information supporting the petition. After the application file is complete and referred to the social work PhD program by the Graduate School, the applicant may be invited to schedule an interview with the program director or other member of the admissions committee, in order to assess individually the applicant's qualifications for doctoral studies in social work. A summary of this interview and the petition for an exception will be made available to the Admissions Committee for consideration prior to its decision regarding an admissions recommendation. Please contact the School of Social Work PhD Program Director directly for questions about this possibility.

If seeking exemption from the requirements, the applicant should be aware that they may be required to register for courses other than the standard curriculum, including courses at the MSW level. The amount and type of such work may be decided by the Admissions Committee before admission and/or by the applicant's academic advisor after admission.

Concurrent Enrollment in the MSW and PhD Degrees Programs

The University of Alabama School of Social Work offers an MSW/PhD concurrent program for **exceptional** individuals who hold, or are candidates for, bachelor's degrees who have very strong academic credentials and aptitude for academic careers in social work. Such individuals may be admitted simultaneously to the MSW and PhD

programs and work on both degrees concurrently, following a strict, rigorous curriculum. Those admitted to the concurrent program will complete all current requirements for the PhD degree. Specific required PhD coursework will be applied to specific MSW degree requirements, reducing the number of semester hours required for the MSW and PhD degrees by 12 hours typically. The MSW degree will be awarded when all requirements for the MSW are completed, and the student will continue to work on the PhD requirements.

Successful applicants **must exceed the minimum admission requirements** of the Graduate School and the School of Social Work MSW and PhD programs.

See the Admission Criteria section of this catalog for more information.

Curricular Requirements

First Year

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
SW 601	1	SW 621	3
SW 620		3 SW 600	3
SW 627		3 SW 641 (from among program approved sequences)	3
SW 640		3 Statistics Course from among program approved sequences	3
Statistics Course from among program approved sequences	3		
		13	12

Second Year

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
SW 623		3 SW 628	3
SW 605		3 SW 648 (or elective)	3
SW 648 (or elective)		3 Elective	3
Research Elective: SW 622 and/or SW 629 OR Elective	3		
		12	9

Third Year

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
SW 699	1-15	SW 699	1-15
Remaining coursework			
		1-15	1-15

Total Hours: 48-76

Transfer Credit

Graduate School information on Transfer Credit.

Doctoral Plan of Study Requirement

The Social Work PhD Program requires 49 hours of coursework. Specific requirements are as follows:

- Thirty-four semester hours of core social work courses, including a one-credit professional seminar, five courses in substantive areas and six courses in research methodology.
- Nine semester hours in an elective area taken in or outside of the School of Social Work.

- A statistical research competency demonstrated by successful completion of an approved statistics two-course sequence.
- A dissertation showing the student's ability to conduct independent research that adds to the knowledge of the profession (includes a minimum of 24 hours of SW 699 Dissertation Research credit).
- Completion of all courses with a grade point average of 3.0 ("B") or better.

These requirements are minimum standards. Additional work may be required, depending on the student's preparation and career interests.

Graduate School information on the Doctoral Plan of Study.

Comprehensive Exams

Upon completion of required coursework, students will take comprehensive exams. Exams will be offered two times during the academic year, near the end of the fall and spring semesters. To take exams, students must submit a "Comprehensive Exams Registration Form" to the PhD program office by the designated mid-semester date.

All students taking the exams at any given time will receive the same question options. Questions will require application of essential social work concepts and knowledge. Exam takers will receive three question options in each of three content areas: research, policy, and practice/theory.

The exams will take place over three consecutive days, with question options from one content area distributed to all exam takers at the same designated time each day. Exam takers will have four hours and 5 minutes to write and return a response electronically.

Exam takers may not consult with others (in other words, no digital or live communication with any other individuals, except the program chair or his or her designee) about the questions or the responses. Exam takers may rely on any other digital or written materials they desire to answer the questions (using appropriate APA citation style).

Questions will be written by members of the PhD committee or others invited by the program director. At each exam offering, the program director will solicit questions from committee members or others they designate and prepare the exam. Three faculty members will submit questions for each of the three areas.

The same three faculty members who submit questions for any content area or areas will grade the responses from the same area or areas. For each response they grade, graders will submit a grade of "pass," "fail," or "pass with distinction." Exam takers' identities will not be disclosed to graders nor will graders' identities be disclosed to exam takers. A student must receive a grade of at least "pass" from a majority of graders to pass each content area. If a student fails in any content area or areas, he or she will have one re-take opportunity.

Standards. In responding to examination questions, PhD students are expected to demonstrate a strong grasp of issues salient to the questions. Normally, this will involve demonstration of knowledge of theory, research findings, and relevant research methods. Answers should show that the student knows the literature well and should reflect the student's ability to critically summarize the important issues and conclusions in the literature. Further, the student should show evidence of the ability to integrate knowledge and to apply concepts.

Answers should be well written. Writing quality can obscure intended meaning. The clarity, specificity, relevance, integration, and application of knowledge demonstrated in the student's response are more important than the length of the response. The student must demonstrate the ability to apply relevant material to challenging questions with clearly-

reasoned, well-informed responses that bear specifically on the point of the question. All sub-sections of each question should be specifically addressed. The student should exhibit mastery in each area: policy, practice, and research. Mastery” means, among other things, that the student has command over essential information and can use it to resolve issues and solve professional problems. Because the Comprehensive Examination is an important part of the educational experience, a high standard of performance is expected. It is understood that Comprehensive Examination question answers are, in a sense, first drafts, but nonetheless, strong written communication skills should be demonstrated.

Re-Examination. If a student fails one or more sections of the examination, those sections may be re-taken once. Faculty members selected by the PhD Program Director will write a new set of questions for each section to be re-examined. Any re-takes should take place at the next exam offering (at the end of the next fall or spring semester).

Results of the second examination will be final. A second failure of any section of the Comprehensive Examination will result in dismissal from the PhD Program and the Graduate School will be notified of this decision.

Students who fail one or more parts of the Comprehensive Examination twice may submit a written petition to the PhD Program Director if they believe an exception should be made because of extenuating circumstances. PhD Program Committee members and the PhD Program Director will review the request and decide whether an exception is in order, in consultation with the Associate Dean for Academic Programs.

Admission to Candidacy Requirements

Following the successful completion of the Comprehensive Examination, the student will be admitted to Doctoral Candidacy.

Continuous Enrollment Policy

Graduate School information on Continuous Enrollment.

Dissertation Requirements

NOTE: It is **imperative** that all students take time to read and review the Graduate School Electronic Thesis or Dissertation (ETD) web page. This gives a step-by-step guide to the whole ETD submission process and answers nearly all of the questions that students have in regard to their ETD submission.

In particular, students *must* follow Graduate School guidelines regarding preparation of the dissertation. See *A Student Guide to Preparing Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, published by the Graduate School.

When dissertations are rejected, it is usually because there are errors in the preparation and inclusion of the preliminary pages. Please make time to review the sample preliminary pages on the Graduate School ETD website.

Dissertation Committee

After the student passes the Comprehensive Examination, he or she must focus on the dissertation proposal. The student should successfully defend the dissertation proposal within one calendar year of passing the comprehensive examination. The first step is to select a Dissertation Chair and the other members of the Dissertation Committee. The student consults with the Dissertation Chair regarding the composition of the committee. The Dissertation Committee must be composed of at least five members of the Graduate Faculty of the University. The Chair of the Dissertation Committee must be a Full Member of the School of Social Work's Graduate Faculty. At least two additional committee members

must be members of the School of Social Work Graduate Faculty. At least one, and no more than two, members of the Dissertation Committee must be from another division of The University of Alabama and one can come from another institution. Students should be sure that prospective committee members will be available for the anticipated duration of the dissertation research. The Dissertation Committee should include members who can guide the student's dissertation research, including experts in the student's substantive area of research specialization and experts in the research methods that the student will use, including a statistician if the dissertation research will involve the analysis of quantitative data or a qualitative data analysis expert if the research will involve qualitative or mixed methods.

Faculty members from other universities may, at times, be appointed to dissertation committees. There should be clear and compelling rationale for such appointments and the faculty member must receive an *Affiliate Appointment* to the Graduate Faculty. The curriculum vitae of each such proposed Dissertation Committee member must be submitted to the PhD Program Director who will advise the Dean of the School of Social Work to recommend appointment to the Graduate Faculty to the Dean of the Graduate School.

The composition of the proposed Dissertation Committee must be approved by the PhD Program Director, the Dean of the School of Social Work, and the Dean of the Graduate School. To report the composition of the Dissertation Committee, the student should prepare an Appointment/Change of Dissertation Committee form.

The dissertation is the major scholarly endeavor of the PhD experience. A broad range of subjects and methods can be used in the dissertation. All dissertations, however, should focus on issues of concern to social work so that the findings will have meaning and implications for social work. The dissertation is expected to contribute knowledge and to demonstrate the student's technical research skills and her or his mastery of the subject matter in the chosen area of specialization. The following list offers examples (but by no means constitutes an exhaustive list) of the range of dissertation options that would usually be considered appropriate. Exploration of the database *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global* using the search term "social work" offers insights to potential inquiry paths.

- **Social Policy or Program Evaluations.** Evaluations of on-going programs and existing policies using administrative records, field studies, interviews, survey data, or some combination of these and other types of data.
- **Case Studies.** Intensive analyses of persons, social groups, organizational components, or communities, with an emphasis on depth rather than breadth.
- **Theory Generation.** Use of qualitative methods, e.g., grounded theory, to generate theory.
- **In-depth Exploration.** Use of qualitative methods to explore conduct in-depth investigations of phenomena, concepts, ideas, and/or experiences.
- **Hypothesis-Formulation Studies.** Exploratory research of a quantitative or qualitative nature on problems or issues with little or no previous study. The goal is to formulate theories and hypotheses for future research. The state of development of relevant theory will determine the appropriate designs to be used.
- **Hypothesis-Testing Studies.** Research on problems that have received sufficient empirical and theoretical attention for clear hypotheses to be stated in advance. The main goal of the research

would usually be to test these hypotheses with systematic quantitative data, as a step in the refinement of knowledge.

- **Methodological Studies.** Development, standardization, and validation of research tools such as scales for measuring phenomena of importance in social work. The constructs investigated in such studies should be grounded in theory.
- **Survey Research.** Use of purposive or random sampling techniques to investigate and/or to estimate the prevalence or intensity of various phenomena of interest to social work. These studies can include epidemiological studies, attitude surveys, and demographic analyses. All would attempt to make inferences about populations based on data collected from samples.

Dissertation Proposal

While the subject matter of proposals may vary greatly, there are certain elements common to all dissertation proposals. The proposal, whether for a monograph dissertation or a three-article dissertation, must have:

1. A clear statement of the research problem or area of investigation.
2. A comprehensive synthesis and summary of the relevant literature and prior research.
3. Unambiguous and comprehensive research procedures including, where applicable, a description of the data to be collected, how the data will be obtained, and a detailed description of how the data will be analyzed. This should include a draft of proposed instruments, interview or question protocols, document audit procedures, and scales. If appropriate, evidence of data availability from archived sources or agency records should be provided.
4. A description of units of observation (subjects, records), how they will be selected and accessed. If data will come from human participants, measures taken to ensure availability and provide for protection of rights and welfare along with informed consent should be described.
5. In the case of multiple-article dissertations, methods should be clearly and thoroughly described for all studies or all parts of the study planned for each article in the dissertation.
6. In the case of multiple-article dissertations, the proposal must include an introduction which introduces the common theme or framework, describes the articles, explains how they are related, and explains their expected significance. There must be connecting language to bridge each planned article description to the next. There must be a summary section that addresses the expected importance of the articles and discusses the potential implications of the overall product. This section should provide a clear description of how the parts of the project fit together.
7. Explication of potential risks or harm to human participants, where applicable, and steps that will be taken to minimize such risks. This will be important when preparing forms for submission to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All members of the UA community (students, faculty, staff) hold an obligation to adhere to Office of Research Compliance policies and procedures.
8. A timetable, including critical milestones and potential sources of delays.
9. A budget (if needed). This will be particularly important if a subsidy to defray dissertation costs will be requested from the UA Graduate School.
10. Potential results and the potential usefulness of the results for social work.
11. An outline and tentative table of contents for the dissertation.
12. The proposal should be concise and to the point. It should clearly demonstrate that the student has mastered subject matter, methodology, and the logistics of carrying out a major research investigation.

Institutional Review Board

The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) of the US Department of Health and Human Services requires that any research that involves the collection of data from human participants must have approval from the UA Institutional Review Board (IRB). Guidelines, forms, and other information can be obtained by calling the Office for Sponsored Programs at (205)348-5152 or visiting the website.

Where students receive approval from the IRB a copy of the certification must be included in the dissertation as the final appendix.

Proposal Defense

When the student and the Dissertation Committee Chair believe the proposal is ready for defense, a Proposal Defense, or formal oral examination, will be scheduled. This meeting should be scheduled through the PhD Program Assistant well in advance, but at a minimum three weeks, of the time set in order for the Program Assistant to reserve space for the Proposal Defense. Copies of the defense-ready dissertation proposal must be provided to all committee members at least two weeks in advance of the oral defense. The student is responsible for presenting her or his dissertation proposal to the Dissertation Committee.

As a "working meeting" between the student and their committee members, the Dissertation Proposal Defense meeting can be conducted in various ways depending on the needs of the student and the preference of the Dissertation Committee Chair. The agenda may include a formal presentation by the student of their proposed project and then a discussion of the proposal by the committee with the student, but the formal presentation is not a requirement (e.g., committee members may be familiar enough with the project that no "reminding" may be necessary via a presentation).

A student, after discussion and agreement by their Dissertation Committee Chair, may invite guests for that portion of the meeting when the student presents details of their proposed project. If guests are invited, they will leave the meeting for the portion of the meeting where the student and the committee discuss the proposal and committee members offer feedback about the project to the student.

As a result of the defense process, the committee may find that the proposal is:

- *Acceptable* (without modification);
- *Acceptable* (with modification); or
- *Not Acceptable*

If the committee finds that the proposal is *Acceptable* (without modifications), the student may proceed with the dissertation research. If the committee finds that modifications are necessary, the student will be given a list of recommended changes for improvement of the proposal. The Dissertation Chair is responsible for seeing that these changes are made to the satisfaction of the committee. If the committee finds that the proposal is *Not Acceptable*, the Dissertation Chair will provide the student with a list of reasons for its unacceptability and a record of the Dissertation Committee's vote. This document will be kept

in the student file. If the proposal was *Not Acceptable*, the student must schedule another proposal defense.

A successful defense of the proposal is defined as an *Acceptable* vote (with or without modification) by a majority of the Dissertation Committee members. After the defense, a copy of the approved dissertation proposal must be submitted to the Director of the PhD Program. The student should successfully defend the dissertation proposal within one calendar year of passing the comprehensive examinations.

Time Limits for Degree Completion Requirements

Although the UA Graduate School has established a nine-year time-to-degree deadline for PhD students, entering Social Work PhD students have a seven-year internal deadline to complete the degree. Students who reach Year 7 will be held accountable for reaching due dates and deadlines distributed each year. If a student fails to meet a due date or deadline in Year 7, yet wants to pursue degree completion, the student must apply for an extension to the social work degree completion deadline.

To apply for an extension, a student should prepare a statement explaining why an extension is justified and why the student is confident he or she will be able to meet new deadlines if an extension is granted.

The statement must first be approved in writing (e.g., via e-mail) by the student's advisor. Prior to approval, the advisor has the option of convening the full dissertation committee for consultation.

If the extension request is approved by the student's advisor, the statement and advisor's approval should be forwarded to the PhD program director. If the PhD program director approves the extension request, they will work with the School of Social Work registrar to propose new due dates and deadlines. The PhD program director will submit a memo explaining their reasons for supporting an extension, the proposed new due dates and deadlines, the advisor's approval, and the student statement to the Associate Dean for Academic Programs and the Dean for their approval.

If a request is approved by all parties, the student must agree in writing to meet the newly established due dates and deadlines. After approval and student agreement, if a student fails to meet any due dates or deadlines, the student's registration can be dropped and he or she can be dismissed from the School of Social Work.

No School of Social Work extensions will extend beyond the UA Graduate School's graduation deadline.

Student Progress Requirement

Every spring semester, each student in the PhD Program completes the *Doctoral Student Planning and Annual Review Form* with advisor assistance.

The form is to be submitted to the PhD Program Director, along with current *curriculum vitae*. Together with reports from the student's advisor, instructors of courses the student has taken, and supervisors of the student's graduate research and teaching assistantships, this information provides the basis for an Annual Review of each PhD student's progress in the program conducted by the PhD Program Committee. Attendance by the student at the end of year annual review is mandatory. Attendance by the advisor is highly recommended.

Additional Academic Requirements

Professional Preparedness Review Policy

Members of the School of Social Work community have an obligation to the social work profession to make reasonable efforts to ensure that

graduates of its professional programs are emotionally and ethically prepared for the demands of ethical practice. This duty is consistent with the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2.09, 2.10 and 2.11) and with the objectives of our academic programs that require students to "understand the value base of the profession and its ethical standards and principles and practice accordingly."

Therefore, the appropriate program director will consult with any student in his/her respective program who (a) exhibits "impairment that is due to personal problems, psychosocial distress, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties" that is deemed by that program director likely to interfere with social work practice effectiveness, or (b) who engages in other behavior proscribed by the National Association of Social Workers. The program chair will (if appropriate) make reasonable efforts to assist the student in resolving behavioral concerns regarding the student's ability to practice effectively and responsibly in the social work profession.

The results of this student/program director consultation may include:

- a determination that the alleged behavior does not constitute an ethical violation or impairment serious enough to interfere with practice effectiveness;
- the development of a plan for remediation of the behavior while the student continues in the social work program;
- the student's temporary withdrawal from the social work program; or
- the student's indefinite withdrawal from the social work program.

Academic Misconduct Information

Graduate School information on Academic Misconduct.

Withdrawal and Leave of Absence Information

Graduate School information on Withdrawals and Leave of Absence.

Academic Grievances Information

Graduate School information on Academic Grievances.

Scholastic Requirements

Students in the UA School of Social Work PhD program must meet the UA Graduate School requirements for good academic standing of a 3.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale. Failure to meet this standard will result in dismissal from the PhD program.

Note that a grade of "I" (incomplete) should be removed within four weeks during the next term of enrollment. If a student's overall grade point average drops below a "B" as a result of the incomplete, the result could be either an academic warning or dismissal.

Graduate School information on Scholastic Requirements.

Graduate School Deadlines Information

Information on Graduate School Deadlines.

Application for Graduation Information

Information on the Application for Graduation.

Faculty

Ph.D. Program Director

Debra Nelson-Gardell