The Doctoral Program at the University of Colorado Denver, School of Public Affairs
Frequently Asked Questions

What Is the Focus of the PhD Program?

- The PhD program in Public Affairs is designed to address the demand for the services of people who are skilled in the theory, concepts, and research areas of public administration, public policy, and public management, as well as more substantive issue areas, such as local government, environmental policy, education policy, emergency management, nonprofit management, public finance, or criminal justice.
- The program emphasizes the development of advanced analytical and research skills while maintaining a focus on using theory to address pressing policy and management problems.

What Are the Admissions Requirements and How Many Students Are Admitted?

- The program admits approximately 8-10 students per year. We receive about 50 applications each year from highly qualified individuals.
- We encourage applications from students from diverse personal, socio-demographic, cultural and professional backgrounds. We aim to have a student body that is inclusive and respectful of these differences.
- We look for students with outstanding grades, strong GRE scores (GREs are required), excellent letters of recommendation from former professors or employers who can speak to a student’s academic potential and experience in public affairs, and a well-articulated written statement about why the applicant wants a PhD in Public Affairs and how the applicant fits with our program in terms of their research interests.
- Fit with our faculty’s research interests is an important admissions criterion. Prospective students should review faculty bios and websites and contact faculty or the PhD Program Director if they have questions about areas of research overlap.

What Are the Program Requirements?

- The doctoral program consists of 66 credit hours, including 24 credits of core classes, 12 credits of electives, and 30 hours of dissertation credit. Of the 12 elective credits, up to 9 may be transferred from a master’s degree program.
  - All students take core seminars in public administration, public management, public policy, economic and institutional foundations of public affairs.
  - The core classes also include 4 methods courses: research design, qualitative methods, intermediate statistics and advanced statistics.
- Core courses are offered once a week in the evenings (4:00-6:45pm). Most students take two core classes per semester. Core classes are not offered online.
- After completing coursework (which takes 2-3 years), students must pass a written and oral preliminary exam, which is offered once a year. Students typically start studying a full year in advance for their exams.
- After passing the preliminary exam, students must write a dissertation proposal, which takes about a year to write, and defend it in front of their dissertation committee before they are allowed to write their dissertation. The dissertation writing can take an additional 1-3 years to complete.
Students must complete the degree within 8 years. Typically it takes between 4 and 6 years to complete the program. On average students spend about 20 hours per week on their courses and dissertation work.

**What Funding Opportunities Exist?**
- The school offers full-funding, including tuition and a stipend for a research assistantship (RA) for three students, for three years. Students who are awarded research assistantships cannot work outside the school. Research assistants work 15-20/week.
- Some funding is also available through SPA’s faculty grants, our school’s research centers, or for teaching master’s level courses.
- A handful of our students receive funding from their employers or outside fellowships.
- Students can get up to $500 per year from the School of Public Affairs and up to $500 per year from the Graduate School to support the costs of attending a conference to present their research.

**What Other Resources Are Available to Support PhD Student Development?**
- **Research:** The majority of our students have opportunities to work with faculty on research projects, present papers at conferences, attend workshops and training. The program offers funding support to attend training workshops.
- **Teaching:** The program requires that PhD students have experience as a teaching assistant before teaching their own classes. The program also offers seminars on ways to build teaching skills. Many of our students, after passing prelim exams, have taught online and in-person courses for our MPA program.
- **Student Association:** The PhD student association meets regularly for brownbag seminars and social events. To encourage further cross-cohort interactions, the PhD student association assigns student “mentors” to incoming students each year. Additionally, representative from the PhD student association serves on the faculty PhD committee. The faculty committee and association members make a concerted effort to coordinate activities and share ideas about program needs.

**What Are Some of the Challenges Students in the PhD Program Face?**
- Students in the PhD program and faculty alike recognize that a primary challenge for the program involves maintaining active engagement of students after exams and the engagement of those who work full-time outside the school. The program has aimed to address this issue by promoting more active mentoring and contact with these students.
- Given the diversity of students in our program, and their busy schedules, some students fail to make timely progress toward degree completion. The program tracks PhD students in the program systematically, reviewing their progress, and identifying appropriate interventions where warranted.

**What Types of Careers Do Students From the SPA PhD Program Have?**
- Graduates of the PhD program continue on to careers as administrators or faculty in higher education, researchers or policy analysts for government or business, consultants, or as high-level practitioners who often are adjunct faculty at colleges or universities.