

A day in the life of a Ph.D. student



Through the eyes of Luke Sanford, learn what being a Ph.D. student in GPS's joint program with the UC San Diego Department of Political Science entails today

By Sarah Pfladderer | GPS News



Just a stone's throw from the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS), Luke Sanford is in his office on the third floor of the Social Sciences building on campus. A poster hangs on the wall beside his workspace that resembles the alphabet, but it's statistical terms. A is for average, B is for boxplot, C is for correlation and so forth.

As indicated by the poster, Sanford belongs to a different brand of the political

scientists in his building. As a Ph.D. student in political science and international affairs, Sanford is incredibly driven by quantitative methods—he literally teaches the class on it as a teaching assistant at GPS. His research leverages remote sensing data and satellite imagery to discover how politics affect the way the physical world looks.

“Everything is self-motivated,” Sanford says of his [joint Ph.D. program](#) between GPS and UC San Diego’s Department of Political Science. “You have to come up with your own research topics and, if you need help, you need to seek out people to work with and help you learn the skills.”

He’s had no issue networking through the GPS’s faculty roster to do so. Some of the remote sensing data Sanford uses is borrowed from Assistant Professor [Jennifer Burney](#), who he also regularly catches up with over lunch. Assistant Professor [Gordon McCord](#), who gave Sanford his crash course on geographic information systems, now plays tennis with him. Naturally, Sanford also is in close contact with his faculty advisor, Professor [Emilie Hafner-Burton](#), who has welcomed him to participate in the [Laboratory on International Law and Regulation](#) of which she leads.

In complement to our [Storify tour](#) of a day in the life of a Ph.D. student, we also asked our subject, Sanford, a couple of questions for more perspective on what enrolling in the program entails today.

How did you end up at GPS to pursue your Ph.D.?

“The quantitative emphasis at GPS is what drew me here. I studied political science in undergrad, but it lacked that quantitative component—this factored into my graduate school search and led me to GPS. Initially, I enrolled in the master’s degree program. But after my first year, I knew I wanted to get a Ph.D. The first year just cemented it for me.

A lot of my friends were taking classes to build skills for professional programs. I was taking classes in more of an academic way, wanting to understand why stuff worked the way it did. Instead of waiting another year to apply, I decided to after my first year and while serving as a Boren Fellow in China. Now, I’m in my second year of the Ph.D. program. It usually takes five or six years, so I still have a few more years in San Diego.”

Are you originally from San Diego?

“I grew up in Colorado. After earning my B.A., I took four years off of school before starting here. The first year, I worked for a water NGO in Sri Lanka. That was when I realized I wanted and needed to go to graduate school.

I came back to the U.S., worked as a ski instructor for a year, went skiing every day. It was something I always wanted to do, and I had to do it before I went to graduate school or else it would never happen. I competed in some big-mountain freeskiing competitions. It was great for one winter, but the lifestyle didn't really feel like what I wanted to do in the long-run.

After coming back down to earth, I moved to China for two years, taught English there and studied Chinese. I had studied Chinese for four years in undergrad, but forgot most of it in Sri Lanka and then as a ski instructor. I sort of climbed my way back up the Chinese ladder, I guess. Needless to say, it's was a windy road to get to GPS, but I'm very happy with how it all panned out.”

Have you pinned down the topic of your dissertation?

“The subfields I'm studying in political science are quantitative methods and international relations. My dissertation will definitely involve things related to China, the environment and international institutions.

Right now I'm working with a lot of remote sensing data. I'm interested in the questions, 'How does politics affect the way the physical world looks?' and 'When you look at the world from a satellite, can you see where different political structures exist?' Last year, I took GIS and Spatial Data Analysis with Gordon McCord, which is sort of what sparked my idea for remote sensing politics—something political scientists haven't really taken ahold of yet.”



To what extent do you interact with GPS faculty members?

“Emilie Hafner-Burton is my advisor. Because she’s associated with both GPS and the Department of Political Science, she was a natural choice for an advisor. Plus, she’s interested in a lot of the same institutional questions I am. I’m planning on working with her in the Laboratory on International Law and Regulation.

Last year I was a teaching assistant, too. I taught for [Barry Naughton](#)’s Economic and Social Development of China class and for [Barbara Walter](#)’s core class, International Politics and Security. During this school year, I am a teaching assistant for Quantitative Methods I, II and III—all of the math stuff.”

For incoming students about, what’s your advice for them to triumph the Quantitative Methods series?

“Try to do a little bit of it every day. It’s like any skill. If you do an assignment in one day and then don’t think about it for two weeks and try to pick it up again, you’ve forgotten the stuff that you learned. If you can, spread it out and learn a little piece of an assignment every day. It sticks in your mind better.”

Since you have both perspectives, can you speak to some of the biggest differences between being a master’s and Ph.D. student at GPS?

“In the master’s program, GPS does a really good job of teaching you a set of skills you can use to find a job. In the Ph.D. program, there’s not one single set of things you need to know.

Everything is self-motivated. You have to come up with your own research topics and figure out how to research those things. If you need help, you need to seek out people to work with and help you learn the skills. You have to create your own structure. That also lends a lot of flexibility. This summer, for example, I haven’t been spending much time on campus. I’ve mostly been working from home.

The course load is very different, too. In the Ph.D. program, my classes have been almost all in the Department of Political Science. This year, I’ll still be taking classes every quarter but also in economics and maybe computer science. Really, my big focus will be passing my comprehensive exams, which are at the end of the second year. Those are two six-hour written exams. Then, I have to write a seminar paper, a publishable-quality research paper.”

Amid your rigorous academic schedule, in what ways do you strike a work-life balance?

“I love outdoor sports. I use sports to take breaks from working. I get done with something, then I go for a run or do something fun on the weekends. I love reading fiction, so at home I read a bit and also enjoy spending time with my wife, cooking dinner and such.

As a morning person, usually two times a week, I will surf in La Jolla really early in the morning. To do that, I like to be in the car by 5:15 a.m. It’s definitely the best time to go. It’s not crowded or windy, and the waves are usually the best then.”

Sanford, whose research examines environmental stewardship from a political science perspective, has been named assistant professor of environmental policy and governance at the [Yale School of the Environment](#) beginning July 1, 2021.