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# How to Get In: A Roadmap for Navigating Decision-Making and the Application Process

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## Whether to Go to Graduate School

Students sometimes pursue graduate school as a default step post-undergraduate education because they are uncertain about the future, afraid that the job market is poor (see Chapter 34), or are looking to defer academic loans. While the prospect of graduating from college can be daunting, it is important that you carefully consider your career aspirations before applying to graduate school. There are a variety of degree programs and educational paths that differentially prepare students for their career goals.

## Master's Versus Doctoral Degrees

The first decision you need make is between applying to a *master's* and a *doctoral degree* program. Often, students see these degrees as steppingstones on the same path. While this perception may be grounded in truth in some cases, these degree programs often provide students with distinct experiences, training, and opportunities with different career paths in mind. A master's degree in political science or in a related professional, interdisciplinary degree program (public policy, public administration, or international affairs) prepares you to apply your understanding of the discipline in practical arenas as a consumer—rather than as a producer—of knowledge. This degree type and associated training is desirable for several careers in government service at the federal, state, and local levels as well as for jobs at non-profits, think tanks, and in international affairs. Graduates of political science master's programs can also find positions as lobbyists, consultants, and journalists, just to name a few. Put bluntly, master's degree programs are often specifically designed to prepare students for employment outside of academics or research.

A doctoral degree in political science prepares you well to be a producer of political knowledge through systematic research. This degree type and associated training are especially desirable for careers as an educator, researcher, or analyst. If these are your goals, you should strongly consider applying directly to a doctoral program, many of which do not require or even award master's degrees.

Determining whether to apply to a master's or doctoral degree program requires both meaningful introspection about your personal strengths and aspirations as well as research about educational requirements of desired careers. Too often, students view degrees with a hierarchical mindset and a goal to get to the “top,” without recognizing the different purposes that they serve. In some fields, the median

earnings for those with professional master's degrees are higher than those with doctoral degrees, and this is particularly true in the social sciences. Instead of trying to reach the "top" of the degree chain, consider your long-term career aspirations and choose the path that is most likely to help you achieve them.

## When to Go to Graduate School

After deciding whether to apply to master's or doctoral degree programs, the second decision is when to go to graduate school, accounting for both financial and family planning considerations. Some students prefer to enter graduate school immediately following graduation from their undergraduate institution, while others decide to enter the job market and then return to school in later career stages. In the following, we explore the advantages and disadvantages of various timing decisions.

### Advantages of Going Early

There are several advantages to entering graduate school early in one's life. Going to graduate school immediately following college can be a good decision for those whose desired careers require a master's or PhD as the minimum education.

If you participated in a rigorous undergraduate research program and are confident about the specific topics you wish to study (and about the relevance of these topics to your career aspirations), you might find it advantageous to continue your studies without a break.

Pursuing graduate school immediately after college is also beneficial in the sense that you will maintain the momentum of the student mindset. Students who are fresh from undergrad might not be as intimidated by the substantial amount of reading and writing required.

Students applying to graduate school immediately after college likely have current relationships with faculty members who can write letters of recommendation and provide guidance on the choice of program and school. If you delay graduate school, be sure to ask your undergraduate professors for letters of recommendation before graduating so that your professors remember and can comment on personal attributes such as class participation and outstanding assignments.

Recognizing the significant time commitment of graduate education, students who want to finish graduate school before starting a career or a family may find it advantageous to complete graduate work as soon as possible. A master's degree in political science usually takes a full-time student one and a half to two years and a part-time student three to four years. A doctoral degree in political science usually takes those with a master's degree an additional four to seven years and those without a master's degree six to 10 years, on average, with some students taking even longer depending on how long dissertation research takes.

### Advantages of Waiting

There are also many good reasons to wait and take some years off between college and graduate school. Prospective students who begin graduate school with some work experience under their belts are often better able to tailor their graduate studies towards their career goals. Additionally, classes may be more meaningful when you have work experiences that relate to the material under study. Students without professional experience might find themselves wandering and sampling classes, which can be expensive in terms of time and money.

Practically speaking, waiting a year or two provides more time to study for the GRE, visit universities, and make connections with potential future professors. These connections can be extremely important because many admissions committees are looking for students who have already identified professors under whom they would like to work.

Another good reason to wait to apply to graduate school is to build the time management skills, maturity, and emotional strength required to complete a graduate degree. Time management skills are imperative when a research paper is due the same week an 800-page book is assigned, and 50 undergraduate papers need to be graded (a workload not uncommon for political science graduate students, espe-

cially in doctoral programs). Additionally, some younger students may find themselves at a disadvantage in the classroom when political debates become heated and even fierce. Older students, who have had more “real world” experiences, are often more capable of being assertive in the classroom while maintaining the professionalism needed to engage in academic debate. This type of emotional intelligence developed through work experience may also be helpful in handling the rejections that inevitably come with submitting work to political science journals and conferences.

Finally, a primary reason for entering the workforce before graduate school is to earn and save money. Graduate school can be expensive and having a nest egg can be advantageous. (For additional discussions about applying to graduate later in life, see Chapter 5. See also Chapter 17 for further tips and suggestions regarding time management.)

## Financial Considerations

When deciding whether to attend graduate school, financial considerations are paramount. A master’s or doctoral degree has the potential to increase your future earnings. While those holding a master’s degree in political science are likely to make significantly more than those with a bachelor’s degree, the pay differential between a master’s degree and a doctoral degree depends on the occupation. University professors with a PhD in political science tend to make substantially more than those with a conventional master’s degree in political science, but in other occupations such as within the government, a PhD might not equate to better income.

While future payoffs are important to consider, so is the current cost of the degree. Tuition costs vary widely among institutions, with some programs costing as little as \$20,000 and others costing as much as \$50,000. Carefully research tuition costs as well as fees. Opportunities for fellowships, research assistantships, and teaching assistantships may also be available and can help cover costs. You should also consider the amount of student loan debt that will accumulate through the course of graduate studies. Before deciding to enter a graduate program, it is critical to review your financial standing and budget for the next two to ten years. Students with families will have special budgetary considerations.

## Family Considerations

Deciding to attend graduate school should be a part of your larger plans for life, which include your career and family. Some potential students decide to go to graduate school before starting a family to focus on academia. Others, however, do not want to defer having a family for the extended time it takes to complete a graduate degree, especially a PhD. Thus, deciding to undertake graduate school with a family requires special considerations. Chapter 16 provides an in-depth analysis of these special considerations, so we will just provide some overarching and general guidance here: it is important to weigh family needs and priorities in the decision-making process and to recognize that graduate school is costly, both from a financial and time perspective; post-graduate school career opportunities (especially on the tenure track) may require geographic flexibility and sacrifice.

## Where to Go to Graduate School

After deciding whether to apply to master’s or doctoral degree programs and determining the “right time” to pursue graduate studies, the third decision involves selecting specific programs that align with your career goals and reflect timing considerations. As you research potential graduate programs, your goal should not be to find the best program as determined by reputable program rankings, but to find the program that is the best fit for your career goals, financial and family considerations, and personal interests or strengths. When you find programs that are a good fit, you will likely start to develop the excitement and motivation that will carry you through the application process.

## How to Go to Graduate School

### The Application Process and Components

There are several important components of political science graduate school applications. Although the specific requirements vary across schools and programs, most require, at minimum, a cover letter, a *curriculum vitae* (CV), a personal statement, a writing sample, and letters of recommendation. As you begin to prepare these materials, there are several important considerations to keep in mind.

First, unlike most undergraduate admission committees that sort through tens of thousands of applications with standardized and objective processes, most political science graduate program admissions committees evaluate applications with a more personal and potentially subjective process. These committees are not always looking for the “best” candidate as determined by standard, objective measures, but rather for the candidates that effectively communicate that they are the best fits for their program and faculty. The best way for applicants to find success in this process is to be authentic in communicating their goals and, particularly, the alignment between their goals and the program to which they are applying.

Second, you should acknowledge that the admissions committee is trying to learn who you are, but that they only have your application from which to work. In most cases, these committees will make determinations without ever meeting you in person. Even in the rare cases where they use interviews, committees will decide whether to conduct interviews based on the contents of your application.

These first two points require you to adopt a narrative-oriented approach to how you build your application. Your goal is not just to develop a collection of stand-alone application components but rather to leverage these components to craft a narrative. Your narrative should tell a story of who you are, what you have done, where you are going, and how your degree program of interest fits into that story. Through your cover letter, CV, essays, and all the other components of your application, you’ll need to build a picture of your narrative in the minds of the committee members who are reading it. They are trying to distinguish between the students who only get good grades and the students who will enhance the reputation of their institution while bringing authentic intellectual curiosity to their classrooms and research. That decision is often not just based on a collection of accolades, accomplishments, or objective measures (though these are all important), but on a mental picture of who you are and where you are going as communicated on paper. You’ll need to start by figuring out the answers to those questions for yourself before communicating that narrative through your application components.

As you craft this narrative, you should not shy away from communicating parts of your identity that have shaped your goals, values, perspectives, and experiences. Like many other areas in society, the discipline of political science has historically underrepresented minoritized groups, but many programs are actively looking to cultivate a more diverse student and faculty population that better represents the society in which we live. Those from minoritized populations or with intersectional identities that have authentically shaped their experience should feel comfortable communicating the connection between their identity and their academic and professional plans. You can also lean into your identity as you communicate the fit between your narrative and your program of interest. Chapters 54 through 61 will discuss in more depth concerns, thoughts, suggestions, and challenges for students from various backgrounds.

Third, it is important to develop drafts of each of the application materials early on in your process to provide ample time for edits and revision. Use the remaining time before application due dates to better tailor your materials to each school to which you are applying, and to capitalize on the limited space provided in each document to craft a unique and comprehensive narrative for the committee to evaluate. It is similarly important to select and communicate school and program, subfield, and/or concentration selections with letter of recommendation writers early so that they, too, have ample time to prepare thoughtful letters of recommendation tailored for each application.

The following subsections outline important, but perhaps not obvious, application material considerations learned through years of advising undergraduate students applying for graduate studies in political science.

## The Cover Letter

The cover letter should serve as an introduction to your application and should consist of a one-page overview of the content that you will elaborate upon in additional application materials. More pointedly, the cover letter should: (1) include a brief introduction to you, the applicant, (2) identify the particular program, subfield, and/or concentration to which you are applying, (3) describe your academic and professional goals while positing that these have motivated your decision to apply, (4) describe the experiences that you have had that have prepared you for success in the selected program, subfield, and/or concentration, and (5) thank the committee for their consideration and provide your contact information for the committee to use to reach you with any outstanding questions.

## The Curriculum Vitae (CV)

The curriculum vitae (CV) should outline your education, employment and professional experience, awards and selection for honorable programs, academic achievements and conference participation, extracurricular activities, service experiences, and academic references in separate, clearly distinguished sections. Through each of these sections, you have the opportunity to convince those evaluating your application of your preparedness for graduate studies.

Through our experience advising graduate student applicants, we have found that a common shortcoming of curricula vitae is the use of undefined acronyms and the lack of sufficient explanations of programs, positions, and experiences, assuming committee familiarity. With this mind, we strongly recommend that you solicit feedback prior to submission. If the person reviewing your application raises questions about acronyms, programs, positions, or experiences, this should signal to you that your document requires some additional attention before submission. Relatedly, you should use descriptions of content on your curriculum vitae to highlight your preparedness for graduate studies on the basis of content and disciplinary exposure, technical training (e.g., research methods and language proficiencies), professional and leadership experience, etc.

In terms of other general advice, we strongly urge applicants to use consistent and visually appealing formatting, to eliminate pre-college content, and to use reverse chronological ordering of content within sections.

## The Personal Statement

The personal statement should consist of a narrative that addresses the following questions in sequence:

- Who are you?
- What are your academic or professional goals?
- How will graduate studies at the specific school (and in the particular program to which you are applying) equip you with the training and experience necessary to help you achieve your professional goals?

In your response to these questions, you should convince those evaluating your application of the sincerity of your interest in and ability to succeed in their program, as well as the alignment between the program that you are applying for and your academic and professional aspirations, and the unique and diverse qualities and perspectives that you will bring to their program.

A well-crafted personal statement requires deep introspection, iterative drafts, and the soliciting and incorporation of feedback. To get you started, we recommend considering the following prompts:

- What shapes your identity?
- Briefly describe one moment in your life when you were the best version of yourself.
- Fill in the blank: In ten years, I want to be \_\_\_\_\_.
- What is one thing you could do today to make your world a slightly better place?
- If you had your senator's ear and one minute to propose a policy or law that could make the United States a better nation, what would you propose?
- What have you accomplished?

## The Writing Sample

The writing sample provides the search committee with an opportunity to evaluate your ability to think critically about big questions in political science, develop research questions informed but unanswered by existing literature, construct and execute an appropriate research design, identify implications of research findings and directions for future research, and communicate effectively in writing.

While it is not essential for the writing sample to reflect the research interests that you espouse in your cover letter and personal statement, alignment may help to signal the sincerity of your academic passions as communicated in other application materials.

## Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate school applications require applicants to submit several letters of recommendation to accompany application materials prepared by you, the applicant. It is important to select letter writers who know you well on both a professional and personal level, have the bandwidth to write you a high-quality letter, have knowledge of and expertise in political science, and are detail oriented. While your letter writers are ultimately responsible for drafting this application component, there are several things that you can do to ensure that your letter writers are well positioned to craft letters that reflect positively on you as a candidate and are aligned with the application materials that you have put together.

First, it is important to discuss specific school and program selections with your letter writers and to provide them with your rationale for selecting these school and program selections (verbally and in the writing of your own application materials). This fosters alignment across all application materials, resulting in a cohesive application package. Second, writing letters of recommendation, when done well, can be a time-consuming task. It is important that you give those agreeing to write you letters of recommendation ample time to put together tailored letters for the different schools and programs to which you are applying. Third, your letter writers likely have many other obligations on their plates. It is important to provide your letter writers with regular reminders of upcoming deadlines to ensure that your applications are complete for submission deadlines.

## Conclusion

Prospective political science graduate students should engage in deep introspection to determine whether or not graduate studies are appropriate based on career aspirations, timing, and financial and family considerations. If, on the basis of these factors, you decide to pursue graduate studies, it is important to select programs that inspire excitement and motivation throughout the application process. It is important to develop application materials early and with feedback that adequately reflect the narrative of who you are, what you have done, where you are going, and how your degree program of interest fits into that story. When done well, you should be confident in the quality of your application and your prospects for admission. Good luck!