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Don't You Forget About Me: The Application Process and Choosing a Program

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Which Should I Choose? Terminal MA Versus PhD Programs

When considering graduate programs, you will need to decide whether to do a terminal master's degree, where you get just that degree at the end, or apply directly to a PhD program. Some people thinking about graduate school often assume that doing a PhD immediately after completing their undergraduate work is the quickest and safest choice. The underlying assumption is that it will be faster than doing a terminal masters' degree prior to a PhD. However, this is not necessarily true.

A terminal masters' program can offer a wide variety of benefits. For some students, it provides an opportunity to explore potential tracks within the discipline of political science prior to entering a PhD program. Although many have already decided on a particular concentration before applying to graduate programs, for others they may need some coursework at the graduate level before finalizing their chosen specialty. Importantly, this is not a negative—taking the time to choose your specialty correctly can be a crucial step in preparing for a successful career and can save time later, when being uncertain of your specialty can result in taking unneeded coursework.

On the other side, another key question that every individual needs to weigh is whether a terminal masters' degree in a particular specialty can be beneficial before starting a PhD program. Some masters' programs are designed to focus on specific areas of emphasis, such as an MPA or MPP. Those planning to do policy-focused PhD studies may find one of these degrees to be an asset. For some PhD departments, having that masters' degree already in hand can be a positive, demonstrating that the applicant can succeed at the graduate level. This is especially true if you've already taken the time at the MA level to consider your specialty and chosen direction in a doctoral program and can effectively communicate that in your applications.

Having said all of this, for many students entering directly into a PhD program may be the right choice. If you are already certain of your concentration and have planned out a field of study, there may be no reason to do a terminal masters' first. Starting a PhD immediately can indeed be quicker if you already are certain of where you want your career to go. PhD programs also tend to offer funding in the form of assistantships, which include tuition, a small stipend, and health insurance (more on funding in Ch. 3).

As we discuss below, personal concerns, such as location and proximity to family, will often be crucial in making your decision. Staying in the right location may necessitate picking a program that is not your first choice for other reasons, at least temporarily. If this means starting in a terminal MA program, it's best to think of this as an opportunity to learn more and prepare for doctoral work, rather than as a disappointment.

Where Should I Apply? Pragmatism and Quality of Life

Everyone has their own advice for how you should choose a graduate program. Most of this advice is valid and you should talk to as many people willing to give you that advice as possible. However, the advice you might receive can also be contradictory, confusing, or patronizing. More importantly, most of the advice currently available to graduate students in all fields, not just political science, fails to consider a key element in the decision-making process: you. So, in this section, we address how to wade through the well-intentioned advice you may receive and still make a choice that fits the kind of life and career you desire.

Most advice offered by graduate programs, undergraduate advisors, and other online sources focus on the pragmatic side of the application process. This advice focuses on choosing programs based on your academic and professional goals. This advice is critical. Once you have made the decision to go to graduate school, you want to aim for the best program for your subfield and ultimate career goals. Since there is so much publicly available information on these topics, we have chosen a few of what we feel are the most important, confusing, or often overlooked suggestions for choosing a program from a pragmatic perspective.

First, as Dr. Daniel Nexon says, “check your ego at the door” (Nexon 2012). Acceptance rates at all graduate programs are quite low. Each school and program have their own idiosyncratic process for deciding which students to accept. Yes, there are some common denominators: GRE scores, your written materials, and the fit between your research interests and those of the faculty. However, the exact weight and influence of each of these elements differs between schools, programs, and even years. Many decisions about whether to admit you to a specific program end up being made for reasons over which you have no control: the availability of funding that year, the number of applications received, or specific faculty members planning on going on sabbatical in the coming years. All of this means that, perhaps the most important piece of pragmatic advice that we can give you is to put together the very best application you can, apply to programs that you think best fit your needs, and then let the chips fall where they may. Easier said than done. But take a breath, hit submit, and try to let it go if you can.

Second, make sure all your application materials do two things: demonstrate you understand what political science and your specific subfield involve and that you are prepared for further study in this field. Applicants often want to include stories that demonstrate their passion for or fascination with political science. While potentially interesting, these stories do not communicate to an admissions committee anything about your ability to succeed in or add to their program. So, instead, you should focus—and ask your letter writers to focus—on demonstrating your knowledge of the field, especially your chosen subfield, the skills you have acquired to date that have prepared you to move on to graduate school, and how attending that specific program will allow you to build on those skills and enter the profession for which you are aiming (whether it is academia, policy, or something else). Your application materials are also where you should address, as directly as possible, anything in your profile that might lead a committee to question the strength of your application—lower GRE scores, a major or degree in something other than political science, or a return to academia after an extended period away.

Third, diversify. Do not pin all your hopes on any one thing—any one school, faculty member, or program. As you consider each program, look for all the different aspects that will help you reach your specific career goals. You should be able to identify more than one faculty member with whom you could work, skills (like methods training, internships, or teaching) in which that program excels, and resources offered by the department, program, or school (like curriculum design courses or conference funding). In the years it will take you to complete your degree, your department will change; faculty will leave, new courses will be offered, or leadership will turn over. The better prepared you are to be flexible and alter your path to completing your degree regardless of these changes, the more likely you will be to succeed and get out of your department, program, and school what you need to build your desired career.

This is where most sources giving advice to potential graduate students stop. From our perspective, however, this misses a key element that should influence your decision: your quality of life. Graduate school—whether you attend a terminal masters’ program or a PhD program—is a multi-year commitment. To be successful in a graduate program over these multiple years, you should consider what you

need in your life to be happy, healthy, and avoid burning out. So, at multiple points in this process, you should take some time to sit and really think about what gives you a high quality of life. This last part of our advice is probably the hardest to give because it truly is unique to each of you. Here are just a few things you should consider as you contemplate your quality of life:

- How far are you willing to be from your family and/or friends?
- What is your relationship status? If you are single, think about what the dating scene might be like in different locations. If you are in a relationship, will your partner come with you? If so, what opportunities are there for them in each location?
- What is the cost of living? If that cost is not covered by your program funding, will you be able to live as comfortably as you need?
- Depending on your identity or interests, will you feel safe, welcomed, and included in the location of the program? For those who are members of a marginalized community, such as LGBTQ+ or BIPOC, this question can be especially important.

Where Should I Go? Making the Final Decision

Unlike the mountain of advice you can find about where and how to apply to graduate programs, when it comes to selecting the program to attend, the prevailing advice is often “go to the best program you get into.” But what does “best” really mean? In this final section, we suggest that “best” can look different to each person and that the process for selecting a graduate program ought to be more rigorous than selecting a program based solely on ranking.

Assuming that students are choosing from more than one program, we recommend thinking carefully about all the facets of graduate life that might be important for any individual student—available funding, the department’s approach to graduate mentorship and professional development, methodological plurality, faculty diversity, flexibility of requirements, ability to take courses across disciplines, and broader department culture—and investigate them thoroughly before deciding. You likely did much of this research during the application phase, but take some time to review that information, contact current graduate students, and ask critical questions of the department, program, and school.

One of the first ways to begin a thorough investigation of graduate programs is, of course, to attend the program’s visit day, and we highly recommend that students attend the visit day for every program to which they are admitted. There is no better way to get a sense of a department than being physically present. Visit days allow students to meet potential mentors and future committee members and to assess whether their teaching, research, and mentoring approach is a good fit for a given individual. They are an opportunity to observe the top layer of a department and its culture. If you are not able to attend every visit day, use the information you already know about each program to prioritize which ones you should attend. For those you cannot attend, be sure to do the extra homework of reaching out to current graduate students for their take on the program.

Visit days should also be about looking for intangible cues—do current students in the program seem happy? Are they gathering in shared spaces to co-work, or do they seem isolated and competitive with each other? The graduate student culture is a huge component of student life and making sure that the environment is supportive, friendly, and inclusive will go a long way to ensuring success in graduate school. Stop and talk to graduate students you meet who are not officially part of visit day and ask how they like the department and what they wish they had known before they started. Meet with as many current students in the program as possible, especially—and this cannot be emphasized enough—students who are advisees of any faculty member you are considering as an advisor.

After visit day, we recommend continuing your outreach with current graduate students in the program. Remember, students who are further along in the program are often not present at visit day, as they may be away from campus conducting fieldwork or in a phase of their program where they do not need to be on campus regularly. Connecting with these ‘older’ graduate students, who have had several years of experience in the program, will provide you with vital information about the department’s culture, history, and any recent or upcoming changes that might affect the graduate experience. When speaking with current students, aim to have an honest and open conversation while resisting the urge

to engage in gossip. But knowing if a potential advisor will be going on leave, leaving the department altogether, or if they are simply not a great advisor, is critical to making the right decision.

You should also be open with current students and faculty about the other programs you are considering, as it is possible that a given program simply is not a good fit for an individual, or that there is a faculty member in another department who would, for substantive or methodological reasons be a better advisor. The ‘right’ fit with an advisor is not just substantive or methodological though. Trying to get a sense of how they advise—how intensely they like to control their students’ research questions, methods etc., as well as how often they are willing to meet, how quickly they respond to student emails, how many drafts of student work they will read, and how they support their students in finding funding for research—is very important to determining whether a given advisor will be the best fit for you.

One final thing you should consider is how flexible departmental culture and requirements are if (as is likely), your research topic changes. One of the most beautiful things about graduate school is how much your understanding of the world is broadened by exposure to many different types of research on a multitude of topics, and it is not unlikely that your proposed research will change between the time you apply and your (usually) third year when you write and defend your prospectus. You can account for this by talking in detail with program staff and graduate advisors to understand how flexible the program is in allowing students to get a master’s in another department, if there are certificate programs available, and whether committee members from outside the department are allowed to sit on students’ committees. The bureaucratic nitty-gritty may seem irrelevant at the beginning of your program, but if your research becomes focused on a particular method, topic, or area of the world that your chosen department cannot support wholly, then the ability to get expert advice or training from outside the department becomes even more critical.

Overall, the main takeaway of this section should be that the process of selecting a program—just on academic merits, even before considering all the other facets of life that are very important to a healthy and successful graduate experience—should be in-depth and rigorous. You should talk to students at all levels, faculty, and staff in every program you are seriously considering, and do your best to get a clear sense of life in the department before making a final decision that will have lifelong professional and personal consequences.

Conclusion

Applying to graduate school can seem like a daunting prospect, perhaps made even more difficult by all the various and contradictory advice you may get. This chapter is designed to focus on the needs of each individual prospective graduate student, and what is important to you in planning your graduate education and your career. Although some things will remain constant for all potential graduate students—writing strong application materials, a statement of interest that shows you understand the field and what role you want to play in it, taking GREs—many other factors will come into play and those can vary widely. Whether you want to start at a terminal masters’ program or enter a PhD program directly, where you want to live, what type of environment is right for you, are decisions that ultimately only you can make.