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Should I stay or Should I Go? Making the Decision to Leave your Graduate Program

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Introduction

In 2020, the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates estimated that 637 individuals graduated from US colleges and universities with a PhD in political science (National Science Foundation, 2021). The attrition rate of individuals in doctoral programs is harder to calculate, though it is estimated that across all PhD programs, less than 75% of individuals who enter the program complete their doctorate (Council of Graduate Studies, 2021). Specifically, within the Political Science discipline, PhD program completion at the Top 20 Political Science programs (according to the National Research Council), is estimated to be between 40-50% of enrolled students (The Ohio State University, 2021). The proportion of women who graduate with a PhD in political science is fewer, with approximately 35% of women graduating from a Top 20 Political Science PhD program (The Ohio State University, 2021).

Despite attrition rates being higher than completion rates of political science PhD programs, there are nuances that can help individuals contemplating leaving their program successfully exit. While it seems oxymoronic to consider best-practices for not completing your degree, there are several factors to explore in your decision. This chapter will provide a roadmap for political science students considering leaving graduate school and resources to navigate the world beyond academia.

Reasons to Leave

You are not the same person you were when you applied for your program, and you will continue to have many dynamic factors in your life as the program continues. Many of your experiences will be like others in your cohort and it is through forming a community with them that you will find much of your strength (see chapter 63 in this volume for more on finding your collective).

There are other circumstances that you might experience that are more unique to your situation such as being an under-represented racial/ethnic minority (see chapter 54 for more on racial and ethnic minorities), an international student (see chapter 57 for more on being an international student), a member of the LGBTQ+ community (see chapter 55 for more on being an LGBTQ+ student), or a first generation graduate student (see chapter 60 for more on being a first generation student). As these authors address, you are not alone and there are resources available. If you experience harassment or assault, contemplating leaving would be normal, adaptive, and healthy; and there are resources to help support you in staying (see chapter 51 for more on discrimination and assault and chapter 52 for more on harassment). You will feel burnout at times in the program and while normalizing the experience doesn't make it less painful at the time, there are steps you can take to make it more manageable (see

chapter 64 for more on burnout).

Mapping Your Exit

From the time that seeds start getting planted in your mind about wanting to leave the program (these typically start before you arrive on campus for orientation), it is important to include your adviser and the director of your graduate program in your department in the conversation. You are not going to be the first person who has ever left their program prior to completion, you will not be creating an untraveled road. There are often intermediary steps that your adviser may recommend, such as taking a leave of absence, or finding an option of “stopping the clock” on your path to program completion. Consider these options. They may be right for you and there is often limited consequence in choosing to take a pause. Prior to doing so, consider your life beyond the program such as health insurance, campus housing, funding, student loan deferment, etc., as it is possible that leaving can also have immediate implications on aspects of your living situation. There are other times when individuals choose to take a leave of absence, even when they have already made the decision to leave, but they are just afraid to say it. If you are truly at a point where you know this is not the right career path for you, make the decision and take the next step in leaving the program.

If you are in a doctoral program, it is possible that there is an option for a terminal master’s degree, even if there is not a formal master’s program at your institution. Stop to consider how far you are from meeting that degree criteria and what it would take to be able to “master out” of your program. Consider doing so, too, even if you already entered your doctoral program with an equivalent master’s degree. Beyond having a really compelling post-nominal for your email signature, it can be helpful on your resume to account for the time you were in your PhD program, even if you won’t be “using” that master’s degree, specifically. It also signifies the work that you have done. Getting into a doctoral program is hard, leaving with a master’s degree is a way to reflect the effort you put forth and the degree you earned.

You will also want to consider any commitments you have made to peers, colleagues, or professors for ongoing and upcoming writing projects or accepted conference proposals. Once you have left the program, with or without a master’s, you can still follow through on any of the commitments you have made, you can still attend the next regional conference and you can complete the book chapter you have started. As you decide if there are projects you are going to abandon (such as not finishing your dissertation), check to see if there is anything salvageable that you might want to get published. You may be strategic in what you choose to continue to engage in, as you are going to need references for your next job. If your adviser can speak to the way you maintained commitment to your peers by presenting a research paper at a conference once you have already left the program, that speaks directly to your character and is something that any employer would respect. One of the arts of leaving your program successfully is to take as much with you as possible; in particular, invest time in exploring the transferable skills you have attained.

Life Beyond the Ivory Tower

Validate the Emotional Weight of this Decision

After you leave the program and you are reintegrating into life beyond academia, you will recognize that many of the ways that you have survived and thrived to this point are skills that will no longer serve you. Before Lin-Manuel Miranda, *The Federalist Papers* were rarely discussed, and certainly not sung about, outside of the political science world. So, you will have much to share at the *Hamilton* watch party and a lot of other information and skills that you will not access again once you leave your program. This is an obvious and anticipated loss that you will have already taken into consideration before leaving, but there are other habits and behaviors you have definitionally had to engage in to arrive at this point. Here are some examples of cognitive distortions that you will be thinking, by virtue of reading the next line, if they have not already been in your head: “I wish I had been as smart as [cohort member’s name], then I could have finished.” “I have spent the last [length of time in graduate school] working on this degree

and now none of it matters.” “I couldn’t get my [master’s or doctoral] degree, I will never succeed at anything.” “I’m a dropout.” “My professors think I am a flake.” “Great, now I have a master’s degree, big deal.” “I should never have started that program; I took away funding from someone who would have been better.” Each of these were generated from a list of examples from the *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* and they have evolved from initial work by Richard Beck in 1967 through working with individuals with clinically diagnosed depression (Yurica & DiTomasso, 2005).

These examples of cognitive distortions are exaggerated a bit for this illustration; however, it is a reasonable estimation that some combination and variation of these statements will feel true to you. You are going to be feeling a wide variety of emotions after you leave, and a sense of grief and depression will be among them. Go to therapy, truly, even if just for a handful of sessions. You have just made a major life adjustment, are going to have a huge shift in identity, and are going to be alone in it. Your partner may be relieved that you will not have this struggle anymore and they won’t understand your sense of failure. Your cohort members may want you to know that you are still their friend and they still want you to come over for Sunday Funday Game Night. You may go a few times, but gradually the invitations will dwindle, and their lives become distinct from yours. Aunt Marge will bake you a pie as she asks you what you intend to do about your student loan debt. It is going to be challenging. Go to therapy.

Marketing Yourself Now

Now that you have had therapy and you believe that you have value as a human, you need to transition your entire framework of your CV and make it into a resume that other individuals understand. You may choose to continue to keep a CV somewhat updated, especially if you are going to finish a few lingering commitments, but you will want to create a broader resume where you can speak to your transferable skills. If you are pursuing a position in business or sales, tell them you have marketed Karl Marx in the Intro to Political Theory and successfully kept 46/52 students awake for an entire lecture. If you are asked to describe how you would delegate tasks amongst a team, describe a project you collaborated on. The biggest struggle in successfully transitioning your experience beyond academia is thinking too concretely about your experience, you have done “it,” you just need to think about how to frame it for the prospective employer. Included in the resources for this book is a list of links as resources to explore transferable skills that you have that you can reconceptualize your resume.

Conclusion

Being accepted into a graduate program is an accomplishment. No one can take that from you, regardless. The hours you spent coding research, grading exams, and reading countless pages all still matter, it just matters in a different way than it once did. If you have made the decision to leave, take a deep breath, and trust that you know yourself more than anyone else and you did what was best for you.

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