**So you want to get into a political science Ph.D. program... Episode I**

Posted By Daniel W. Drezner Sunday, March 18, 2012 - 4:15 AM
<http://drezner.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/18/so_you_want_to_get_into_a_political_science_phd_program_part_one>

After blogging last week about the gendered effects of a Ph.D. for foreign policy professionals, I got a reasonable query from Caitlin Fitzgerald: if getting a Ph.D. is so great, how does one get accepted into a doctoral program in political science?

This is a good question. Despite all of the warnings being proffered about the stultifying nature of graduate school and the horrible, very-bad, not-so-great quality of the academic job market, competition to get into top-tier grad schools is still quite high. So, how do you get in?

As someone who got accepted into a very competitive Ph.D. program in Boston San Francisco - well, not in San Francisco, but nearby - no, not Santa Clara [OK, that's enough!!--ed.] and as someone who has sat in on more than his fair share of admissions committees, I can proffer some useful tips. I'm going to do this in two parts: first, what undergraduates should do, and then what post-baccalaureate types should do. I'm starting with the undergraduates because it's not too late for them it's at the college level when an individual applicant can lay the necessary groundwork for a strong application.

Before I jump into the five dos and don'ts, let me remind you of something: in good Ph.D. programs, admissions committees are looking for a reason to ding you. The problem is a surfeit, not a dearth, of qualified applicants. By the last stages of the process, admissions committees are often making accept-or-reject decisions on distinctions so minor that no one would admit them publicly (it's not that we want to do this - it's that admissions slots are scarce and looking at minutiae seems fairer than, say, a random draw). What this means is that any serious chink in your admissions armor - low GPA, low GREs, weak recommendations, etc. - gives an admissions committee a valid excuse to ding you. So if you're really interested, you have to make sure that every facet of your application is up to par.

With that out of the way, here are the Five Dos and Five Don'ts for undergraduates applying to Political Science Ph.D. programs in either international relations or comparative politics:

THE FIVE DOS:

1. Read some actual political science. This might sound obvious, but a lot of undergraduate programs in political science -- particularly in the first few years -- will have syllabi larded with weird textbooks and Foreign Affairs articles. And that's OK for undergrads -- but if you're thinking of getting a Ph.D. and you're not terribly familiar with either International Organization or the American Political Science Review, you're in for a world of hurt. Read the journals to get a sense of A) what it's like to write in political sciencese; B) not sound like an idiot when you write your application; and C) Make sure, one last time, that this is really what you want to do for the next six years.

2. Write a thesis. Ph.D. programs want to be sure that you will have the intellectual chops to do real research and real writing. The best opportunity you'll have to do that as an undergrad is your B.A. thesis. If you don't write one and apply to a Ph.D. program, that's a red flag. Why didn't you write one? If you can't handle that, how could you handle a dissertation? So write a thesis whether it's required or not -- and make sure it's good.

3. Get comfortable with math. Even if you're aspiring to do pure political theory or qualitative work, you're going to have to take classes in methodology, game theory and econometrics in graduate school. Oh, and by the way, with the arrival of Big Data, even areas of research that used to be qualitative are becoming quantitative. The less innumerate you are, the less these courses will seem like a foreign language. At a minimum, make sure you have familiarity with intermediate-level statistics and multivariate calculus. Linear algebra is nice too.

4. Go abroad and learn a language. Experience is not weighted all that heavily in grad school applications. Overseas experience is an exception, particularly if you want to specialize in an area or region of the globe. Learning a language pertinent to that region or area will help as well. Exploit study abroad programs as a way to signal that you'll be up for the rigors of field work.

5. Get rich. Ready for some real-keeping? If you can fund your own ticket for graduate school, the admissions standards are not nearly so high. Whether you inherit family wealth, win an NSF fellowship, or finally make sure that Nigerian e-mailer comes through, having no need for fellowship support makes you a freebie to most programs. At that point, the equation changes from "is this candidate among the best?" to "is this candidate above the bar?" The latter is much easier to clear than the former.

And now.... THE FIVE DON'TS:

1. E-mail professors in Ph.D. programs at length. Your mileage may vary, but speaking personally, I'm at the point where I get so many of these emails that I ignore all of them. All. Of. Them. Why? Because professors are not stupid -- we know you're sending these out en masse, we don't know whether you really have the chops to get a degree, and because we don't make decisions like this because of e-mails. I won't deny that this tactic might work once in a blue moon, but it's been so played out that most profs' eyes glaze over a these missives.

2. Detail, at length, your plans to change the world in your personal statement. The personal statement in a doctoral admissions packet is the easiest way for a candidate to screw up -- it'll be almost as bad as your dissertation prospectus. What admissions committees are looking for are signs of emotional and intellectual maturity matched with an ambition to do first-rate research. They are not looking for "and then I realized" epiphanies about how getting a Ph.D. will allow you to change the world. Backstory matters in explaining why you're interested in doing what you're doing, but don't kid yourself -- unless you're a survivor of an ethnic cleansing, your personal narrative at 21 is just not that interesting. Side note: if you are the survivor of an ethnic cleansing, hey, go to town in your statement.

3. Put all your application eggs into one basket. Let's say you've done everything I've suggested. Let's say you've researched grad schools carefully, and have decided that, given you're research interests, the only person you can work with is Robert Bates at Harvard. Congratulations, you've gone overboard in specializing!! Apply to good programs, not just to work with one person. Individual professors move, retire, pass away, go on sabbatical, or drink too much and hit on students and make things veeeeery awkward in the aftermath. Diversify your portfolio and make sure you apply to programs with a deep bench in your area of interest.

4. Get celebrity professors to write you letters of recommendation. Letters of recommendation matter a lot to this process, and I've noticed a trend among those-savvy-beyond-their-years to make sure they ingratiate themselves with well-known professors as a way of calling attention to one's application. I get this instinct, and done well it can work -- a glowing letter from, say, Madeleine Albright or Zbigniew Brzezinski that indicates deep knowledge about you can be a game-changer. Here's the thing, though -- 99% of the recommendation letters I read from people at this level of fame are bland, impersonal boilerplate. That will hurt you. So don't bend your research interests to match a star professor -- make sure that the profs who know your area well also know you well enough to write good letters of recommendation.

5. Take on debt. Let's say you work really hard and get accepted to a top tier program, but without the fellowship support that you need because -- silly you! -- you're not rich. You night start thinking, "sure, I'll have to take on some debt, but it's a great program and therefore worth it." Wrong! First of all, it's not like you're going to be raking in the bucks as a post-grad -- even a small amount of debt can be financially debilitating. Second, not getting a fellowship is a powerful signal of lukewarm interest on the part of the school, so you'd already be starting with a strike against you. Unless you're rich, only attend traditional Ph.D. programs that offer you full tuition and a stipend.

Oh, and one bonus DON'T:

5\*. Talk up your blog or Twitter feed as an example of research. It isn't research, and no one cares anyway.

Part II -- what to do if you've been out of college for a while and want to apply to get a Ph.D. -- will follow this week.