earning a ph.d. in political science



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# Considering

Many scholars of political science started out the same way you probably have. Most did not begin undergraduate programs with an eye toward earning a Ph.D. or becoming a political scientist. Instead, they gradually discovered they had a love of learning, a knack for intellectual pursuits, and a special interest in government, politics, theory, the international community, or public policy.



# **Graduate School**

If these are becoming your interests, and you are curious about what it takes to start a career as a political scientist, this brochure will provide critical information to help you begin your exploration of graduate study in political science and the career paths that are available to a professional political scientist.



### **Rewards of an Academic Career**

Most people who earn a Ph.D. in political science work as professors in colleges and universities—teaching and writing about politics. These positions often lead to important service to schools, communities, nation, and the international community as advisors, theorists, commentators, and decision makers. The political science faculty in your undergraduate institution have already opted for this career, and you should ask them to describe it to you in detail.

Political scientists, like people in any other profession, have their own private reasons for choosing their career. But there are shared reasons as well that distinguish an academic career from other professions, such as law.

As Robert Keohane, professor of political science at Duke University, explains, an academic career affords scholars a certain degree of independence in their work: "Being a professor means working for yourself, rather than someone else. You have great freedom to be entrepreneurial—to define your own projects, according to your interests and your values."

Scholars also have a unique opportunity as a special kind of "activist." Keohane notes, "Teaching is itself a way to change the world, by broadening young people's outlooks." Almost all highly accomplished people can point to teachers who made their accomplishments possible; likewise, good teachers take satisfaction in the accomplishments of their students.

Further, as Keohane states, "Professors write as well as teach. The world can be changed by writing as much as by 'action." Consider, for example, how research on the theory of political representation has advanced voting rights and legislative districting; how research about the courts and who uses them has transformed legal services and legal education; or how theory building about international conflict underpins national security policy. The general public's understanding of their political world—for example, ideas about what issues are on the public agenda, what programs to finance, or how to respond to international conflicts—is continuously shaped by the work of political scientists. Academic achievements have significant impacts.



### Careers Outside Academe

There are many career settings outside academe for people with a Ph.D. degree in political science, such as the federal government, research institutes addressing public policy and foreign affairs, survey research centers, congressional staff, state and local government, and the media. Campaign management and electoral polling in the U.S. and around the world are fascinating and rapidly growing careers for political scientists. Business, international banking, nonprofit and international organizations, foundations, non-governmental organizations, and independent consulting also offer exciting opportunities.

Pursuing these careers with a Ph.D. allows a special status and independence which can lead to important roles in policy making and public affairs. Your career could also span both academic and nonacademic positions.

To learn more about what political scientists do, you might attend political science conferences as an undergraduate to hear about the most recent scholarship in political science and to see an important way in which political scientists develop and share their work. The American Political Science Association (APSA) hosts the largest national political science conference which is held on the Thursday through Sunday before Labor Day each year. Students are very welcome to attend. Many regional and state political science meetings held throughout the year also welcome students to attend. You can find information about upcoming conferences by consulting the APSA website (www.apsanet.org/mtgs), and the July issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics*, the journal of record for the profession, provides the preliminary program of the APSA Annual Meeting.

### Sample Job Sectors Outside Academe

Congressional staff
Federal government/agency
State and local government
Public policy research institutes
Diplomatic corps or Foreign Service
Survey research centers
Media
Business
International banking
Nonprofit and international organizations
Foundations
Independent consulting

### **Qualifications for Graduate Study**

Graduate political science departments are looking for students with fairly high grades as an undergraduate, especially in the last two years. Typically, that means you should have an A or high B average. Poor performance early in your college years or in an occasional course is less important than your overall record in upper division courses. Good test scores on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) can partially compensate for lower grades. Although most students who attend graduate school in political science did major in political science, admissions committees are less interested in a particular major than they are in your general interest and ability.

Your letters of recommendation are also important. Recommendations should be written by professors who are personally familiar with your academic work so that they can comment in detail on it, and at least one of your letters of recommendation should be written by a senior, active scholar (usually a full professor). For those who have taken time off before entering graduate school, ask for recommendations both from employers and former professors.

As for the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), most admissions committees are well aware that such tests may not accurately measure the ability of students. They nevertheless form an important part of your application for many graduate schools. Complete information on taking the GRE can be found at www.gre.org.

If the program for which you are applying is competitive, you might consider taking the exam a second time if you do not score in the 80th or 90th percentile. Poor GRE's can be offset by outstanding grades, and a slow academic start in college can be compensated by an improvement in grades and high GRE scores.

Because there are 128 Ph.D. granting departments of political science in the United States, there is room for differences in ability and academic background. You should talk, however, with your undergraduate professors and determine that your own abilities are of a sufficiently high level to warrant the commitment that is required to complete a rigorous graduate program successfully.

It is not, incidentally, necessary or expected to have a M.A. degree to begin a Ph.D. program. Most Ph.D. candidates begin their graduate studies directly with a B.A. degree. The M.A. may be earned along the way, or it may be bypassed altogether. Most financial aid for graduate study in political science goes to students who apply directly to enter a Ph.D. program, not a Master's program.

### Job Prospects in Political Science

#### What Are the Job Prospects in Political Science?

The current academic job market is changing, marked by the increase of different types of institutions, technological innovations, increased student enrollments, and retirement of an aging professoriate. Competitive academic year salaries for faculty coupled with the benefits of the exible hours, earned sabbaticals, nine-month calendars, summer salaries, research contracts, travel and other features make working in academe an attractive career choice. In addition, appointments are available in specialized programs and in administration. Opportunities outside academe are quite promising for political scientists as well.

There are many supports for the job search as well. An APSA online resource, eJobs, provides a year-round listings of academic positions in political science in the U.S. at the assistant and associate professor level as well as some positions outside academe. Subscribers may access the eJobs database at www.apsanet.org/ejobs. APSA also hosts the Professional Placement Service during its Annual Meetings where job seekers can meet with potential employers to interview for job openings. Access to the database of jobs and candidates' resumes for the Professional Placement Service is available online at www.apsanet.org/mtgs/placement.cfm. Regional associations also provide similar placement services at their annual conferences—you can obtain further information through the various associations' websites. In addition, APSA has developed a special section of its website devoted to professional development and opportunities for graduate students (http://www.apsanet.org/opps). APSA has also prepared a monograph exploring a variety of career choices for political scientists entitled "Careers and the Study of Political Science."

In most cases the professor who directs your dissertation and your department's placement director will work to help you find an appropriate placement.

Finally, of course, your own interest and enthusiasm for political science is important. Let the graduate admissions committee know what your interests are and that you have the commitment and personal drive to earn a Ph.D.

### Seeking the Best and the Brightest

Political science wants first-rate minds—male and female, "majority" and "minority." Interest and merit, not ascribed characteristics, are the hallmarks of the political science professoriate. Historically, minorities and women have been underrepresented in most academic professions. Scholarly research and teaching are impoverished to the degree that the experiences of these groups are excluded. You should know that the political science discipline and the American Political Science Association have a record of commitment to minorities and women. APSA members support and fund programs such as the Minority Fellows Program, the Minority Identification Project, and the Ralph Bunche Summer Institute for Undergraduate Students.

The Association maintains directories and lists of African American, Latino/a, Native American, Asian American and women in political science to facilitate job placement.

APSA supports active Committees on the Status of Women, Blacks, Latino/as, Asian Pacific Americans, and Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and the Transgendered in the Profession. The Association gives special, annual recognition to academic work about the politics of women and minorities in the form of the Victoria Schuck Award for the best book on women and politics, the Ralph Bunche Award for the best book on ethnicity and politics, and special annual awards ceremonies celebrating the achievements of African American and Latino/a political scientists.

APSA also systematically collects data from departments of political science around the country to measure the progress

### A Word on the GRE

#### The Graduate Record Examination

GRE outcomes are similar to the scores that you received on the SAT, but not necessarily. If you are a late-bloomer, your GRE could be much higher than your SAT score. It is worthwhile to take a GRE preparation class offered on your campus or by an independent company.

made in recruiting, retaining, and rewarding traditionally under-represented groups. APSA has an active Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms and a prohibition of discrimination based on any consideration other than merit (like sexual preference or marital status), an absolute stance against sexual harassment, a statement against rules preventing spouses from working in the same department, and a policy endorsing full academic status for part-time work in order to allow for family obligations like having and raising children.

### Fields in Political Science

Like any thriving discipline, the boundaries of political science are fluid. Generally speaking, the encompassing fields of political science are international politics, comparative politics, political theory, public administration, methodology, American politics, public law and courts, and public policy.

There is increasing recognition throughout the profession that the social sciences are integrally linked and that disciplinary boundaries should be subordinate to intellectual concerns. More and more, political science study blends with history, economics, psychology, law, and other fields, and any interests you have in these areas will be an excellent complement to political science study.

As scholarly work merges, new specialized subfields develop such as international political economy. Yet others, such as political parties and interest groups, are mainstays. Moreover some fields like international politics and public opinion receive much more attention in the wake of world events than they do at other times.

The APSA membership form identifies nearly 90 specialized subfields in political science. Here are just a few of those categories to give you a sense of the breadth of the discipline:

- Political philosophy
- Public administration
- Politics and history
- International relations and world politics
- International organizations and law
- Foreign policy
- Comparative politics, including country and area specialties (e.g. Latin American, Chinese, African,

Caribbean, and Middle Eastern politics)

- International security and arms control
- Methodology
- Public policy (e.g. health care, science and technology, or the environment)
- American government and politics
- Urban and ethnic politics
- Public law and judicial politics
- Legislative politics
- Presidential and executive politics
- Political parties and interest groups
- Electoral behavior and public opinion
- Political communication
- Political psychology and socialization
- Gender politics
- African-American politics
- Latino politics
- Lesbian and gay politics
- Religion and politics
- ... and many others

### **Time Out Before Grad School**

For those of you who take time out before entering graduate school to work and/or raise a family, graduate schools are interested in you and the experience you have gained. The information in the schedule in this pamphlet about organizing undergraduate records and taking the GRE is applicable to you. For references, contact former professors and employers. In addition, you should find the following schedule useful as you prepare your graduate school applications.

### What to Expect in Graduate School

In graduate school, you become intimately familiar with a body of knowledge and gain the training in advanced statistics and/or a foreign language and the research skills necessary to become a political scientist. Graduate programs share some characteristics of professional schools such as law and medicine. Perhaps more so than professional schools, however, a premium is placed on intellectual creativity and independent thought.

The goal of graduate study is that you yourself will be able to add to what is already known. By the time you complete graduate study, you should have a passion to pursue your fields of specialization and to impart your ideas to your students and colleagues.

The typical graduate program includes three years of course work with an emphasis on intensive reading and on research papers. Students often have the opportunity to do some teaching at the undergraduate level and to work closely with a member of the graduate faculty as a research assistant. As an advanced graduate student, you will be able to present your research at professional scholarly meetings and begin publishing articles even before you complete your graduate program.

During the first three years of graduate study, you are expected to hone your analytical skills and master several fields within the discipline of political science. This mastery is demonstrated when you take examinations, both written and oral, in your chosen fields. Passing your examinations at the end of your course work period qualifies you to write your dissertation, a piece of original research that typically

takes one or two years to complete. While the dissertation is your own work, you will be able to choose a dissertation advisor who will help you in the right direction. Upon satisfactorily defending your dissertation before a faculty committee primarily of your own choosing, you are granted the Ph.D. Some students publish all or parts of their Ph.D. thesis, a helpful boost in building a publication record and in obtaining an assistant professorship or research position after graduate school.



Selecting a Graduate Program

To select a graduate school, first arrange a meeting with several of your political science professors. They will give you some guidance about what sort of graduate programs exist and their strengths and weaknesses. They can also help you match your particular interests and aptitudes with specific graduate schools.

Second, you will want to systematically review political science programs, including information on their graduate admissions requirements, the availability of financial aid, and their faculty, in order to identify which departments might be of interest to you. A list of departments with doctoral programs in political science and links to their websites can be found on APSA's website (www.apsanet.org/opps/grad). Most departments of political science will be glad to send you a brochure about their graduate programs which will provide you with more detailed information to help you pare down the number of programs you are considering. Many universities and some political science departments have graduate student associations. Students in these organizations can provide an insider perspective of graduate school and possibly even answer specific questions you may have about a particular program.

Because graduate programs vary considerably in their emphases, it is important to discuss each school you are considering with one or more of your professors. Contact and, if possible, visit department chairs and other faculty within programs that interest you to discuss their programs. APSA has developed the Graduate Student Questions to Ask (GSQ) Program for just this purpose. The GSQ Program consists of political science departments with doctoral programs that have agreed to answer specific questions about their programs from prospective students (see the box at the right for a list of these questions). For more information about this program and the list of participating departments, visit www.apsanet.org/about/questions\_to\_ask/gradstudent.cfm.

You should probably apply to three to five programs of varying degrees of competitiveness in order to increase your likelihood of being accepted and of receiving financial assistance.

### **Questions to Ask**

For the **Graduate Student Questions to Ask (GSQ) Program**, APSA has compiled a list of key inquiries that graduate students should consider when selecting a graduate program.

#### Data on Graduate Recruitment and Admissions and Placement

•What data does the department have on the number of applications, admissions and placement of doctoral students in their programs?

Note: Participating departments in the GSQ Program are asked to make public the data submitted to APSA in its annual surveys of departments

#### **Preparation for Professional Employment**

- Who advises students on curricular and career issues and how is it done?
- How does the department prepare students to:
  - Assume teaching responsibilities as teaching assistants and as teachers after graduation, and
  - Pursue scholarly interests leading to professional presentations and publications?
- How does the department inform students about professional ethics and responsibilities as teachers, researchers, and members of a scholarly profession?
- Does the university have a teaching and learning center for doctoral students and faculty? If so, how does the department use it to enhance professional preparation for professional employment?
- How does the department assist in preparing students to enter the job market?
- Does the department make any special efforts to prepare graduate students for professional employment outside of the standard faculty roles in political science departments - such as
  - International relations
  - Interdisciplinary programs
  - Professional schools
  - Community colleges or other educational institutions
  - Research or administrative positions in think tanks, business, government or non-profit organizations?

### **Timeline to Apply to Graduate School**

Spring before Applying

Take the Graduate Record Examination in the spring of your junior year or the fall following so that you will know your scores in time to take the exam a second time, if necessary, and to select graduate programs based in part on your scores.

#### September

- a) Talk with professors in your political science department about graduate school in general and specific programs which may be best for you. Ask what a professor's life is like in order to get a personal perspective, if you are interested in an academic career.
- b) Use APSA's website (www.apsanet.org/opps/grad/phdprograms.cfm) to find links to graduate programs in political science. Make a list of programs that interest you. Research the programs suggested by your professor(s).
- c) If you have not already done so, register for the Graduate Record Exam (www.gre.org).

Spend a significant amount of time preparing for the exam. Get a copy of the practice booklet published by the Educational Testing Service or view the practice test online (www.gre.org/pracmats.html), or use study aides available at campus bookstores.

#### October

- a) Send for program brochures and applications from the graduate schools that interest you.
- b) Decide who among your professors might recommend you for graduate school. Personally visit your possible recommenders to ask them to write a letter. Prepare a briefing sheet for each recommender listing the course or courses you took with them, the grade you received, the title of the papers you wrote in that class, anything notable about your performance, your grade point average, your major and minor, and any other information about yourself relevant to an academic assessment of your potential for graduate study. If you are considering taking time off before entering graduate school, select recommenders and give them a briefing sheet to keep in their files to refer to when you are ready to apply to graduate school in the future.
- c) Select the three to five graduate programs to which you would like to apply.

#### November-December

a) Submit your applications to the graduate programs which you selected. While deadlines vary, most graduate schools have a February 1 deadline for consideration of admission and financial aid in the fall of the next academic year. Some graduate schools will accept applications for admission much later. You should check on the deadlines for each institution to which you are considering applying.

b) Take the GRE or its equivalent if you haven't already. The Educational Testing Service will send your score directly to the institutions you select. This is the latest date at which you should take the GRE.

#### March-April

In March, graduate schools will begin to notify applicants of their admission status and financial aid awards. It is the standard within the political science profession and the graduate school community that "students are under no obligation to respond to offers of financial support prior to April 15" (APSA Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms). Thus, the best course is not to make a final decision before April 15. It is your right to wait until that date to give you time to receive and weigh any offers you may have.

Also, APSA and the Council of Graduate Schools have established the ethical norm that if you accept an offer of financial aid on or after April 15, that decision is binding. In other words, you cannot change your mind and take an offer of aid from a different school after that date without the consent of both schools.

### **Application Requirements**

General Application Requirements for Graduate School

- General interest & ability
- A or high B average
- Graduate Record Examination (GRE)
- · Letters of Recommendation

### **Financing Graduate School**

Financial support for graduate study is more readily available than it is for professional schools like law or business. This support may come in the form of fellowships, tuition waivers, teaching assistantships, or research assistantships. It is almost exclusively for people seeking a Ph.D. degree; rarely for Master's programs.

When you apply for admission to a particular doctoral program, you should also apply for financial aid. The better your record, the more likely you are to receive substantial support from your graduate institution. If your financial resources are particularly limited, fee waivers are available for those taking the GRE and minority students applying to one of the 48 graduate programs participating in APSA's Minority Identification Project (www.apsanet.org/about/minority/minorityid.cfm).

Most financial aid for graduate study is provided by the graduate institutions themselves. However, there are other places to look. For example, Pi Sigma Alpha (PSA), the national political science honor society, awards five (5) scholarships for graduate study in political science annually. Applicants must be Pi Sigma Alpha members finishing their undergraduate work and be nominated by their Pi Sigma Alpha Faculty Advisor. See your chapter advisor for more information on the PSA Howard Penniman Scholarships, or visit the PSA website at www.apsanet.org/~psa.

Information on financial support is also posted on our website (www.apsanet.org/PS/grants).

### **Financial Aid Resources**

- Cash for Grad School: The Ultimate Guide to Grad School Scholarships (HarperResource, August 2004), by Phillip C. McKee and Cynthia Ruiz McKee.
- Dan Cassidy's Worldwide Graduate Scholarship Directory: Thousands of Top Scholarships Throughout the United States and Around the World (Career Press; Fifth edition, 2000). Lists thousands of grants, scholarships, loans, fellowships, and internships from colleges, foundations, corporations, religious and fraternal groups, and private philanthropists. Includes tips on applying that give you the best chance of winning the award.
- Getting Money for Graduate School (Peterson's Guides, 2002). Identifies more than 1,000 scholarships, grants, prizes, forgivable loans, and fellowships. Includes information on scholarship scams and what to watch

out for.

- Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D. (Noonday Press (Farrar Straus, & Giroux), 1997), by Robert L. Peters. Includes a section on financial aid that concentrates on obtaining departmental aid and how schools assess a student's financial needs.
- Graduate School Funding Handbook (University of Pennsylvania Press; Second edition, 2002), by April Vahle Hamel, et al. Comprehensive guide for students seeking financial support for graduate school in the United States or abroad. Includes useful addresses, deadlines, number of available awards, number of applicants, purpose of grants and restrictions, duration of awards, applicant eligibility, and application requirements.
- Peterson's Online Graduate Resources (www.petersons.com/GradChannel/). Comprehensive collection of resources on preparing for graduate school including tips for financial planning, preparing admissions applications, and GRE test preparation.
   Website includes a searchable database of graduate programs and scholarships.
- Real Guide to Grad School (New York, NY: Lingua Franca, 1997). This guide includes information on the history, current issues, programs and specialties offered, where you should consider going (depending on your area of interest), the job market, resources (journals and websites) of twenty-three disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.
- APSA sponsors the Minority Fellows Program for African American, Latino/a, and Native American political science students entering graduate school. Minority students may also participate in the APSA Minority Identification (MID) Project through which APSA circulates names and addresses of minority political science students to 48 participating graduate political science programs in the U.S. Participants of the MID Project are also eligible for application fee waivers from these graduate programs. For more information about these programs, visit the APSA website at www.apsanet.org/about/minority/.
- National Science Foundation provides Graduate Research Fellowships. For information, visit the NSF website at www.nsfgrfp.org/, write to info@nsfgrfp.org, or call 1-866-NSF-GRFP.

- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) have established the Doctoral Scholars Program and the Compact for Faculty Diversity Program to prepare new minority faculty. For information, visit the SREB website at www.sreb.org/programs/dsp/dspindex.asp, write to doctoral.scholars@sreb.org, or call 404-875-9211.
- Ford Foundation funds fellowships for minorities for study in research-based doctoral programs, providing a substantial stipend. Each year, the Ford Foundation awards 60 predoctoral, 35 dissertation, and 20 postdoctoral fellowships. The awards are administered by the Fellowship Office of Policy and Global Affairs at the National Research Council of the National Academy of Science. For information, visit the website at http://nationalacademies.org/fellowships; write to infofell@nas.edu; or call 202-334-2872.
- American Indian Graduate Center administers graduate fellowships for American Indian and Alaska Native students from federally-recognized tribes. Contact the Center at 4520 Montgomery Blvd. NE, Ste. 1B, Albuquerque, NM 87109; 505-881-4584; or visit the website at www.aigc.com.
- Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student's Guide to Colleges, Universities, and Graduate Schools (New York: NYU Press, 1994) by Jan-Mitchell Sherrill is helpful in planning for graduate school. Visit the Queer Resource Directory (www.qrd.org) and Steven Sanders' homepage at IU (www.indiana.edu/~glbtpol/) for extensive resources on gay and lesbian politics, law, and public policy online.



### A Final Word

If politics and government, the play of ideas, careful analysis, and creating and imparting knowledge excite you, the opportunity for a fulfilling and stimulating life may be at your door. As Professor Robert Keohane



sums up from his perspective as a distinguished faculty member:

"Being a professor of political science lets you follow your own interests and pursue what you value. And you can change the world for the better through your impact on students, your writings, and actions.... Many of us therefore rejoice in our choice of a profession, and we are urging young people to consider careers in political science."

In discussing the value of his graduate studies in his current career as a private consultant on intergovernmental relations, planning and public policy issues, Dr. Bruce McDowell, President of Intergovernmental Management Associates, states:

"I have needed every ounce of it [graduate political science training] in dealing with the unbelievably complex realities of public policy making and government management. It gave me a sound basis for continued lifelong learning."

A public policy researcher for a nonprofit policy research and education organization offers the following advice to those considering graduate study in political science:

"The key is being involved in the 'world' of your chosen career – being part of the networks; demonstrating interest in the issues and organizations; becoming competent and conversant; volunteering; doing internships."

As you can see, earning a Ph.D. in political science offers you an unrivaled opportunity and an independent voice to advance these interests in any of many roles.

### About APSA

The American Political Science Association is the leading society for individuals engaged in the study of politics and government. Founded in 1903, the Association provides its 15,000 members with services to facilitate research, teaching, and professional development.

APSA membership is composed primarily of political scientists doing research and teaching in U.S. colleges and universities, although 13% of its members reside in over 70 countries around the world and about 17% pursue careers outside academia, in government, research and consulting firms, and private enterprise.

APSA especially welcomes student members. In fact, nearly 5,000 students are APSA members. Members receive three journals (*American Political Science Review, PS: Political Science and Politics*, and *Perspectives on Politics*), discounts on APSA publications, and discounted Annual Meeting registration. Visit the APSA website (www.apsanet.org/about) for additional membership information and to join online.

### Selected APSA Publications That May Be of Interest to You • A Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science

A handbook of principles addressing the professional conduct of political scientists. Third edition, 1997. \$3.60 (APSA members, \$2.40); shipping for single copies, \$1. Also available for free online at www.apsanet.org/pubs/ethics.cfm.

#### • Careers and the Study of Political Science: A Guide for Undergraduates

Monograph discussing how the knowledge and skills political science majors acquire can benefit them as they pursue careers in law, government, business, journalism, and teaching. \$6 (special bulk rates for APSA members); shipping for single copies, \$1.

#### •State of the Discipline, 3rd edition

Chronicle of scholarship and directions of political science.

To order, visit the APSA website at www.apsanet.org/pubs/



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