

Whether and How to Apply to Ph.D. Programs in Political Science: FAQs

Matthias Staisch, The University of Chicago*

This Version: October 4, 2013

1 Do I need a Ph.D. to attain my professional goals?

Before applying, you must seriously consider what kinds of professional experience you are foregoing by entering a Ph.D. program. The most, maybe the only, compelling professional reason for pursuing a Ph.D. is your wish to become an academic.

2 What do academics do?

In everyday practice, an academic job entails a variable combination of two things: the conduct of rigorous research in a sub-field of your choice and/or instruction of political science undergraduates (primarily), and graduate students (secondarily).

3 Don't academics do more than read, write, and teach?

You may have encountered plenty of academics who transfer in and out of the policy world, for example, by testifying before Congress, working at non-profit think tanks, assuming a position in the government, or appearing on television news programs. This is true, but remember that in the absence of a solid research foundation, the academics you have in mind would not have access to the public sphere. They rarely put their academic jobs on hold, which means that they continue to be accountable to the institutions that employ them. Remember also that academics, should they ever enter the public sphere, do so relatively late in their professional lives. Research and teaching always come first, policy second.

*Feedback welcome at mstaisch@uchicago.edu

4 Should I obtain a Ph.D. if I want to primarily work in government or public policy?

It depends on what kind of policy work you see yourself doing in the future. We recommend that you peruse the educational credentials of those individuals in your age cohort who hold the kinds of positions in government, think tanks, and the like that you aspire to holding. A relatively small number of them will have earned Ph.D.'s. Why? Because a terminal M.A. degree remains a strong enough signal of professional competence. What a Ph.D. in government or public policy tends to add to your portfolio is the option of landing an adjunct teaching position. But see how the weight of the equation has shifted: Policy now comes first, your research concerns are driven by your policy audience(s), and teaching comes last. Please consult with your faculty and preceptor as you are crafting a list of programs to apply to. As a general guideline, geographical proximity to the centers of policy pays off. Incidentally, academic institutions in and around DC, New York, and Boston offer Ph.D. programs that are tailored to those whose ambition is to enter the policy sector.

5 As someone primarily interested in an academic career, to what programs should I apply?

The academic job market is highly competitive. To maximize the likelihood of receiving rigorous training and appropriate job market preparation, you must aim high. Ph.D. candidates on the job market move laterally and down; they rarely move up. This does not mean that you simply apply to the top 10-15 political science programs as listed in the most recent edition of U.S. News and World Report. It does mean that you build a top-heavy portfolio of at least a dozen schools. Substantive fit matters most. As you research the top departments, you will learn that the breadth of their substantive coverage outperforms the lesser programs. Why? Because they are able to throw much more money at doctoral education. That said, there are top 10 programs which may not be very strong in your chosen specialty. Moreover, there are plenty of very fine programs outside of the top 10 which offer expertise in an area that you may want to study. It would be foolish not to apply to these. As you finalize your list of schools, solicit feedback from faculty and graduate students who have recently had to make the same choices you are facing.

6 As someone primarily interested in an academic career, should I even apply to a 2nd tier Ph.D. program?

Unfortunately, there is little agreement about where the 1st tier ends and the 2nd tier begins. Some faculty think that the top ten programs exhaust the

1st tier. If you are swayed by this exclusivist mentality, you should definitely add some 2nd tier schools to your portfolio. Generally speaking, there are between 15 and 30 Ph.D. programs in the United States which offer rigorous *and funded* training in the discipline. Please talk to faculty and graduate students about how to identify the dozen or so schools that best match your substantive interests. Faculty in particular may be knowledgeable about a crucial piece of information: the mobility of their peers. It would be unfortunate to apply to a given program because of Professor X, only to learn upon admission that Professor X is set to retire the year you would arrive, or has decided to take up a position at another institution.

7 How do I maximize my chances of getting into a top academic Ph.D. program?

Let me be frank: You cannot “game” the admissions process. The error term is simply too large. Your stellar application may be rejected, because you are someone who wants to study mobilization by insurgent groups, and department X is about to lose the faculty member who happens to study insurgency; or, because department X, in the previous year, admitted a couple of students who study similar things; or, because department X’s admissions committee does not count a faculty in your sub-field among its members, and proceeds to ignore all the files that fall outside their areas of expertise. That said, there is ample evidence that you can increase the likelihood of being admitted by:

1. Writing a compelling statement of purpose in the mode of a narrative of intellectual growth
2. Submitting at least 3 strong faculty letters of recommendation
3. Testing into the 80th percentile or better on all subsections of the GRE
4. Submitting application materials which signal your ability to reason analytically, and persuade in a methodologically sophisticated way.

8 How do I craft a compelling statement of purpose?

See my memo titled “Demystifying the Statement of Purpose.”

9 How do I solicit strong letters from faculty?

Ask faculty who are intimately familiar with your academic work. Most of you will approach faculty who have evaluated your class performance. This is fine, as long as the class allowed plenty of face-to-face interaction between you and

the professor. Also, you want to make sure that the professor actually read and graded your written assignments. This is absolutely crucial, and this is why it is not good enough to solicit letters from faculty who taught you in large lecture classes. Rarely do they have rich enough impressions of you to craft a personalized letter. Often do they ask their teaching assistants to write the letter for them. I have seen many a letter which consisted of one big block quote from a teaching assistant. This simply won't do. If you must rely on faculty who teach you in a lecture format, take advantage of their office hours. Don't be shy; they must get to know you beyond your student ID number. Ask if you can submit a personal information packet containing your transcript, statement of purpose, CV, and anything else which would help the professor write a non-generic letter. Ideally, at least one of your three letters comes from a professor who has worked closely with you on a research project. Since graduate school is about turning students (consumers of research) into professors (producers of research), strong faculty letters speak to your potential for making this transition. There is no better evidence of this potential than already having undertaken research as an undergraduate or M.A. student. What counts as research at your level? Writing a B.A. or M.A. thesis, serving as a research assistant to a professor, or a supervisor at another research institution such as a foundation or think tank. Give faculty plenty of time to write and submit letters. Ideally, you would approach them right after they have evaluated your performance, even if the application deadline is a year in the future. This way, you make sure that they remember you well. Professors can always update the letter later on. Some, but not all faculty, list detailed instructions for soliciting letters on their websites.

10 Do high GRE scores really matter?

Yes. The top programs receive hundreds of qualified applications per admissions cycle. Faculty on the admissions committee must cut upwards of 90 per cent of them. To make this daunting task easier, they eliminate a healthy portion of the applicant pool by looking at standardized metrics such as your grade point average and your GRE scores. It would be a shame if you handed in a stellar application whose materials no one takes a close look at, simply because you missed the GRE cut-off.

11 How do I signal analytical and methodological rigor?

Your enrollment in the CIR program sends a strong signal of analytical rigor. CIR's reputation as a research/writing-heavy program is well-established. Your M.A. thesis will provide the basis for the writing sample you submit as part of your application. Since the thesis is longer than the required writing sample, you have the opportunity to cut your project down to its essentials. I strongly suggest that you write the sample from scratch, using your approved thesis as

its ingredients. This is your chance to signal to the admissions committee that you know what a draft academic article looks like. Do not waste it by handing in some class paper that you received an A for. Beyond the courses you are required to take, we encourage you to hone your analytical skills in as many seminar-level classes as you can digest. In addition, we urge you to become a (semi-)regular participant in at least one of the University workshops. The training you will receive during just one year of workshop participation will put you at an advantage vis-à-vis your peer competitors. As for methodological rigor, you need to be aware that the top programs require students, once admitted, to enroll in a fairly extensive sequence of courses in quantitative methodology. This does not mean that all students are required to employ these methods in their dissertation research. What it does mean, however, is that it has become conventional to expect Ph.D. students to become at least semi-literate in these methods. This is even more understandable in light of the fact that many self-identifying qualitative methodologists employ the quantitative template. To be very clear: Nobody expects you to excel at these methods at the time of application. However, admissions committees have become biased toward students who are able to signal a non-hostile attitude toward these methods. You can easily do this in a number of ways: showcase undergraduate coursework in mathematics and/or economics, have a very high score on the quantitative section of the GRE, or take a UofC graduate-level course that contains a quantitative methods component. If you already know that quantitative methodologies are not entailed by your way of thinking about some substantive problem, you must be able to signal rigor in a different methodology. Again, relevant undergraduate coursework, a very high score on the verbal and essay sections of the GRE, or a UofC graduate-level course in, say, case study methods or discourse analysis, will do the trick. Please consult your preceptor in case you are worried about your background in research methodology.