

Paths Through Graduate School (General Guidelines)

(Notes Developed for the Graduate Student Professional Development Workshop, February 2001, and Meeting with Prospective Graduate Students, March 2001)

Most students at top political science graduate programs receive their Ph.D.s after five to seven years of study and research. Some finish more quickly.

A typical sequence appears below. Students who win external support for their work from the National Science Foundation or other sources may be able to accelerate their progress by reducing the teaching commitment to one year or less.

Year One

The main goal in the first year is to build a strong grasp of social science reasoning, gain basic familiarity with “the canon” in a major and minor field, and begin to develop a tool kit of important methodological skills. Students should also take at least one or two courses that are directly related to their likely research interests.

A typical course plan includes four classes per term. Of the eight, at least two should be introductory sub-field proseminars (field seminars). Most students also begin the statistics sequence (2-3 courses over the year, depending on level of preparation and interest). Students may wish to take a course on the History of Political Science or the research design course in the major field of interest in either the first or the second year.

There are other important things to do the first year too. One is to develop a rapport with at least one political science faculty member each term and at least one scholar outside the department. Go to office hours. Ask the faculty member to help you think about trends in the sub-field, identify the major journals you should skim, and offer a philosophy about choosing potential dissertation topics. Make sure you read Rackham’s guides on mentoring before you approach faculty members, so that you know appropriate etiquette.

A second goal is to begin and maintain a journal. Record the names of books and articles you like (the kinds of books and articles that make you say, “I wish I could write like that!”). Scribble down thoughts about potential dissertation topics or ideas you find interesting. Draw your inspiration from classes, from talks you attend, from conversations in office hours and with peers, or from the newspaper.

A third goal is to learn to use the library and electronic resources in your major field of interest. Skim the shelves of the periodical reading room several times during the year. Acquaint yourself with the sections of the library that cater to your interests. Become proficient in using electronic indexes, including Mirlyn, JSTORE, Proquest,

Lexis-Nexis, and others. Create a catalog of URLs to important think tanks and academic projects in your area of interest.

Finally, engage in some reconnaissance. Go to department workshops that help you understand how the profession works and how universities operate. Attend departmental social events. (If you miss these occasions, you will automatically lose information important to your future work.)

At the first-year review, ask faculty members for advice about courses, discuss developing dissertation interests, and think about people you should get to know.

Under the new system, all students are on fellowship in this first year.

Summer, Year One

Students use the first summer in a variety of ways. We encourage those who have solid prior training and who have taken two or three courses in a major or minor field during the first year to prepare for a first preliminary exam. Many of the exams take place in September, right before classes start. Other good uses of the first summer include working as a research assistant or as an intern in an organization you plan to study later. Some students also decide to acquire training in a foreign language, or they participate in the summer statistics or survey research programs on the University of Michigan campus.

Year Two

Students have three main aims in the second year. One is to complete most of the basic training in political science needed to carry out work of one's own. A second is to begin to develop a research proposal to submit to external funders in the fall of the third year, when the deadlines fall. A third goal is to begin to learn the art of teaching. It is wise to take at least one preliminary exam in the second year.

Many students reduce the number of classes they take to three in the term in which they begin to teach. Teaching takes time. Beginners enroll in a one-credit course on teaching and invest heavily in preparation.

Typically students increase the proportion of classes in the area in which they plan to carry out dissertation research. They take at least one class that requires a term paper or research paper. If they have not done so already, they take a research design class in their major field.

Good students pursue other important objectives too. For example, they continue to develop a rapport with faculty members in their field of interest both within the department and around the university. They monitor the schedules of public seminars around the campus and attend a few talks of interest. They go to workshops on proposal writing and research funding. They join a reading group or interest group within the

department (such as the Comparative Politics Research Group or the American Political Behavior reading group).

Students who contemplate field research as part of the dissertation process may wish to apply for funds for pre-dissertation research. These grants are available on a competitive basis from different parts of the university, and sometimes from external funders.

The end of the second year is a good time to check in with oneself. Knowing what you know now about the profession, do you want to proceed? Instead, do you want to get an M.A. degree and go work for a think tank, a polling organization, government, or someone else who will pay you a good salary (better than you will get in academe!) for an interesting job? An M.A. is a reasonable option. Think about it. Better to make the change in the second or third year than to drift at the dissertation stage after you have made a huge investment.

At the second year review, ask faculty members for ideas about potential dissertation committee members and consult about courses to take.

Summer, Year Two

Most students use part of the second summer to refine their dissertation proposal drafts. The basic draft should exist by May, developed in a research design course. Usually much work remains. It is important to strengthen literature reviews and even to carry out some preliminary field research or to play around with relevant data sets. Students respond to faculty comments and seek additional conversations with faculty members whose interests make them potential dissertation committee members. The deadlines for grant competitions begin in mid-August and extend through January, so it is very important to use the summer effectively.

Studying for remaining preliminary exams is also important for most students. In addition to assembling one's own notes, it is sometimes helpful to read review articles in journals or in annual handbooks or reviews of political science. Consult faculty members about the best places to look for these.

Other useful ways to spend the second summer include intensive foreign language study, methods or survey research training on the University of Michigan campus, an internship with a think tank or organization related to one's dissertation interests, or a summer research assistant position.

Year Three

In the third year, the main aims are to complete all basic coursework and preliminary exams, develop and defend the dissertation prospectus, form a dissertation committee, and apply for research funding. Achievement of candidacy by the end of the third year is essential to continued support through the university, so all preliminary exams must be out of the way by the end of the year.

Be aggressive about applying for external research funding. Plan your strategy during the summer, using the department's fellowship guide and web-based sources. Make sure you know when deadlines fall and what you have to submit. When you have a proposal ready, remember to apply for IRB Approval. Write for foreign research affiliations and clearances, if required. Remember that external funding from the SSRC, NSF, or other sources is important on an academic resume, and it allows you to support data collection costs.

Assembling a dissertation committee is important. No single faculty member can provide all of the advice and time that most students need. Dissertations benefit from multiple sources of ideas. It is up to the student to form the committee.

Identify a national and international network of scholars working in your interest area. Check their personal webpages for working papers and syllabi or bibliographies.

Consider serving on a departmental committee—a recruitment committee, for example. Committee service provides important vantage points on the profession and the university. It brings a useful perspective on the enterprise.

Think ahead. Ask faculty for tips on carrying out fieldwork, if you plan to travel to research sites. Go to departmental workshops on writing the dissertation so that you know more about what you are getting yourself into!

Summer, Year Three

Typically students begin their dissertation research the summer after the third year. Those with external funding prepare to travel abroad or to research sites. Some students continue specialized language or methods training.

Year Four

The fourth year is the time to do the main research for the dissertation. For political theorists, this activity may take place mainly on campus, as it will for students who use existing datasets. Other students are engaged in research that requires primary data collection and travel abroad.

Under the new funding program, students who remain on campus without external support will be attached to student-faculty working groups as research assistants, to departmental functions, or to individual faculty research projects.

Research and writing usually are isolated enterprises. Consider forming a support group or a letter-writers' group. Communicate with each other. Remember that your peers are your future professional network, and now is a good time to develop ties.

Participate in departmental workshops about dissertation writing and going on the job market. Consider giving a paper about your research at the Midwest Political Science Meetings or another professional meeting.

Year Five

Many students will complete their Ph.D.s in the fifth year. A few who have made significant progress during the fourth year may be able to go on the job market in the fall. Usually students use the fifth year to write and to begin to prepare their job market dossiers. Fifth-year fellowships are designed to facilitate writing without the distraction of teaching.

Writing is a lonely enterprise. Consider participating in a dissertation support group with other students. Create regular meeting times with faculty committee members. Don't let these slide. The students who don't finish are the ones who avoid their advisers! Choose a series of non-credit talks or seminars that interest you and make a date with yourself to go to these events. Participate in a student-faculty working group.

At the beginning of the year scout out potential post-docs or centers that host graduate students who are in the final stages of their dissertations. These positions are immensely helpful and provide some extra time for writing and for beginning new projects, removed from the pressures of teaching. Apply for these positions.

Study the ads in the American Political Science Association personnel newsletter. Speak with faculty about writing letters of reference. Develop a personal webpage or a posting for the department "Hire a Michigan Ph.D." site. Assemble a dossier. Develop a practice job talk and do a couple of practice sessions.

Apply to give a paper at the professional meetings in your field. Professional associations often have job placement services. Find out what you need to do to use these.

Students who remain on campus during the sixth year should apply for GSI positions and other opportunities.

Year Six

A few people will leave the department, having won jobs at other institutions or post-docs. Those who remain should continue to work on the tasks set out under Year Five.