

INTRODUCTION TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Skills for Scholarly Success | Political Science 590
Portland State University | Fall 2026

Syllabus and Course Schedule

Compiled from the Canvas course export on October 5, 2026.

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Instructor & Contact Information

INSTRUCTOR David Kinsella Department of Politics and Global Affairs Hatfield School of Government	CONTACT INFORMATION Phone: 503.725.3035 Email: kinsella@pdx.edu Office: Urban Center Building, 650L Office Hours: Monday 1:30-2:45, in person or via Zoom
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Course Description

This course introduces students to the graduate environment and culture of academia. Designed for the first quarter of graduate study, course content focuses on developing essential skills for success in graduate-level education, such as: how to read academic literature, note-taking and seminar norms, and understanding the prospectus requirement. It also covers the skills necessary for navigating the often-competing demands on graduate students' time, and begins to develop an academic toolkit that will serve them throughout their career.

Learning Objectives

The general objective of this course is to prepare students for a graduate education. To that end, we work with students on clarifying expectations for graduate-level work, introducing them to academic culture and norms, and discussing resources at both the university and department level. At the conclusion of the course, students should:

- be familiar with the schedule, pace, and requirements of the MS program;
- understand the expectations for participation in graduate seminars;
- be able to read academic literature quickly and efficiently;
- be comfortable with several library and internet resources for finding relevant academic literature;

- have a strong grasp of what a thesis, or any other substantial research paper should look like; and
- feel welcomed and supported in academia and the PSU graduate student community.

Assignments & Assessment

Reading

Assigned readings can be retrieved via the Millar Library website or are available online. If no link provided for the course reading, log into the library and search the online holdings. Searching by the title of the article (in quotes) is usually the most efficient.

Assignments

Students will be required to keep a “learning journal” to facilitate reflection and discussion. After each class session, students will write a 1-2 page (double-spaced) entry. Each entry should serve a dual purpose: first, as a place to write down the knowledge gained about the department, university, political science profession, or academia as a whole; second, as a place for reflection on related challenges, experiences, or plans related to the discussion during that class session. For example, after the first class session (the “welcome to grad school” session), students should write about the various resources on campus that seem particularly valuable to them. Next, they should reflect on the process and value of forming a community. They could, for instance, consider if there are existing campus groups that they could join, or if they might form a monthly group meeting of the cohort. They might reflect on what could be gained from building a community, both from the perspective of personal well-being and as beneficial for career advancement, as well as any personal reluctance they might have to joining a community.

Assessment

This course will be graded Pass/Fail, based on the following two methods of assessment:

1. The learning journals are to be submitted three times during the term (weeks 3, 6, and 10) and will be evaluated as “pass” if the student has made a good faith effort to reflect and engage.
2. Attendance and active participation in weekly class sessions is required.

Discussion & Assistance

Discussion

During the regularly scheduled class sessions, there will be plenty of opportunities to ask questions and to engage in discussion. If in addition, you would like to engage in asynchronous discussion, I have set up a separate Class Discussion forum for that. Feel free to post comments or questions on any topic related to graduate school or academic life that might arise during the term.

Assistance

You are always welcome to discuss matters with me. If you want to talk during my office hours, there is no need for an appointment; just show up in person or via Zoom. If you want to set up an appointment for a different time, send me email and we'll get something scheduled.

I am also happy to field briefer questions by email, as well as anything having to do with the logistics of the course itself. I can also try to help with technical questions regarding Canvas, but I am no expert and I often find myself turning such questions back to students in the course, especially because what I see in Canvas as the instructor is not what you see as the student. We always manage to figure things out, though.

Conduct, Courtesy, and Student Resources

Academic dishonesty. Students are responsible for being familiar with the PSU Code of Student Conduct and Responsibility, especially the section concerning academic misconduct -- that is, plagiarism or other forms of

academic dishonesty. If you are unsure of the definition or consequences of academic misconduct, please consult with me.

Use of Generative AI tools. The use of tools which check and correct your own writing (built-in spelling and grammar checkers or third-party tools like Grammarly) is different from artificial intelligence (AI) tools that generate content or structure in response to your prompting (like ChatGPT). In your work for this course, use of the first sort of tool is encouraged, while use of the second sort of tool is strongly discouraged. The use of generative AI tools to write entire learning journal entries is not permitted. If you do use generative AI tools to write or inform any part of a journal entry, you must acknowledge this in an appendix to the paper. For example: "I used the following set of prompts to instruct ChatGPT to generate a draft of Paragraph 3." Failure to do this is academic misconduct.

Discrimination. PSU's policies require faculty members to report any instance of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or other forms of prohibited discrimination. If you would rather share information about these experiences with an employee who does not have these reporting responsibilities and can keep the information confidential, please contact a confidential advocate (503.725.5672 or online) or another confidential employee listed on the sexual misconduct resource webpage.

Disabilities. If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. The PSU CARES Team, hosted by the Dean of Student Life, is available to consult with you regarding any issues of students in distress, including sexual misconduct.

Technology in the classroom. Because they are distracting to others, cell phones may not be used during lecture and should be silenced at the start of class. Laptops and tablets may be used to take notes, but not for email, web browsing, or social media. Electronic devices may not be used to photograph, video, or stream course lectures or discussion, but lectures may be audio recorded with permission of the instructor.

Course Calendar

The topics covered each week are as follows:

30 Sep	Welcome to Graduate School
7 Oct	Degree Path and Course Plan
14 Oct	Classroom Expectations and Etiquette
21 Oct	Advising, Resources, Opportunities
28 Oct	Academic Literature
4 Nov	Time Management
11 Nov	NO CLASS
18 Nov	What is a Prospectus?
25 Nov	What is a Thesis?
2 Dec	What's Next?

Detailed Weekly Course Schedule

The following schedule reproduces the substantive weekly module information and major course milestones from Canvas in a compact, printable format. Links and LMS navigation controls are omitted.

Week 1 - Welcome to Graduate School

What we cover. Welcome to the community of scholars! The university provides many resources for new students. But one of the most important survival skills in graduate school is to discover and develop your social support structures within the scholarly community.

Readings

- Thomas M. Carsey, Tom's Comments : Advice about Graduate School, Finding a Job, Reaching Tenure in Political Science and other Social Sciences, and All of the Steps in Between (Last compiled: 7 September 2020), chap. 5, "Making it Through the First Year."
- PSU Executive Leadership
- PSU Office of Academic Affairs

Week 2 - Degree Path and Course Plan

What we cover. There's a rule for that! And a form. And a deadline. You've been inserted into a very large organization -- into a program within a department within a college within a university. Let's figure out how to stay on top of all the rules and regulations for graduate study at PSU.

Readings

- Master of Science in Political Science: Student Handbook , September 2026
- Zotero Basics

Course note. Zotero session in Library, room 170

Week 3 - Classroom Expectations and Etiquette

What we cover. Class time in a graduate seminar is generally an interactive learning experience. How to prepare for that? Do instructors have certain expectations for graduate-level questions and comments? Many graduate courses at PSU are cross-listed with undergraduate courses. How to navigate those discussions?

Reading. Zachary Shore, Grad School Essentials: A Crash Course in Scholarly Skills (University of California Press, 2016), chaps. 2, 4.

Assignment due. Learning Journal: Installment 1

Week 4 - Advising, Resources, Opportunities

What we cover. Few public universities are flush with cash, and even fewer of the urban ones are. PSU is no exception. But there are resources and opportunities available for those who seek them out. We'll talk about some of these, and also about where to turn for advice when you've got ideas but are unsure about how to pursue them.

Reading. Jessica McCrory Calarco, A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum (Princeton University Press, 2020), chap. 3.

Course note. Guest: Safia Farole on reading strategically

Week 5 - Academic Literature

What we cover. Two of the biggest challenges when conducting a review of the academic literature: (1) too little has been written; (2) too much has been written. We'll discuss resources and strategies for locating scholarship relevant to a particular topic and identifying the best and most influential work when there's so much out there.

Readings

- Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Doing a Literature Review." PS: Political Science and Politics 39, 1 (January 2006): 127-132.
- Research Guides and Tutorials: Political Science , PSU

Week 6 - Time Management

What we cover. You've heard the horror stories about the life of a graduate student. Maybe you've experienced it. Grad school isn't easy, nor should it be. But you shouldn't let it keep you from the other pleasures of life. Be more than your graduate program!

Reading. Calarco, A Field Guide to Grad School, chap. 5.

Assignment due. Learning Journal: Installment 2

Week 7 - NO CLASS

Course note. Veteran's Day, University closed

Week 8 - What is a Prospectus?

What we cover. A master's thesis, or any substantial research paper, is a real grind, perhaps even a flop, when the topic is not well-conceived and the methodology poorly planned. Academic research often encounters unexpected difficulties, but preparing and defending a research prospectus is the best way to keep these to a minimum.

Reading. Carsey, Tom's Comments , chap. 3, "Deciding What to Study."

Week 9 - What is a Thesis?

What we cover. If you are pursuing the thesis track, your master's thesis will be the crowning achievement in this program and will document your expertise on some question of interest to political scientists. It will represent an original contribution to knowledge in our discipline. At your thesis defense, you tie it all up with a bow.

Reading. Calarco, A Field Guide to Grad School , chap. 7.

Week 10 - What's Next?

What we cover. Von Moltke said that the battle plan never survives first contact with the enemy. Well, a conference presentation plan rarely survives past slide #3. Let's talk about conferences and other quirky aspects of scholarly life. These shared experiences socialize us as academics and professionals.

Reading. Carsey, Tom's Comments , chap. 10, "Professional Conferences."

Assignment due. Learning Journal: Installment 3