

# Masters Program in Political Science:

*Frequently Asked Questions*

Division of Political Science  
Mark O. Hatfield School of Government  
[www.hatfieldschool.pdx.edu/political-science](http://www.hatfieldschool.pdx.edu/political-science)

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## Introduction

The Division of Political Science offers a graduate curriculum leading to the Master of Arts (MA) and Master of Science (MS) degrees. The division also participates in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) and Master of Science in Teaching (MST) degree programs, which allow a political science concentration for students pursuing a career in teaching. Political science is also one of five participating disciplines offering a major concentration in the Public Affairs and Policy (PAP) Ph.D. program.

This document provides answers to the most frequently asked questions about the Masters Program in Political Science. It is also available online at <http://www.pdx.edu/hatfieldschool/ps-grad>. Students who are interested in the MAT/MST degree should contact Robert Mercer, Assistant Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; those interested in the Ph.D. program in Public Affairs and Policy (PAP) should contact Professor David Kinsella, the PAP Director. Questions concerning the MA/MS program in Political Science, or this document in particular, may be directed to Professor Chris Shortell, Chair of the Division's Graduate Committee ([shortell@pdx.edu](mailto:shortell@pdx.edu) or 503.725.5139).

The MA/MS program has a strong academic orientation and is designed to teach students about current scholarship in political science. The Division is especially interested in applicants who plan to pursue a Ph.D. or a degree in law after finishing with their master's degree at PSU.

## Application Process

- **How do I apply?**

Portland State University requires that an applicant submit **two** different application packets, one to the PSU **Office of Admissions** and the other directly to the Division of Political Science. Application instructions, including the required forms, can be obtained from the **Office of Graduate Studies**, 117 Cramer Hall, or online at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_general\\_admission.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_general_admission.php).

These application forms provide detailed information about what is required by the university to apply. However, the Division requires that applicants provide some additional documents, as explained below.

- **What are the application deadlines?**

Although the University admits students for post-baccalaureate study four times per year, the Political Science Division admits new students into its masters degree program only twice per year, Fall and Spring. For **Fall admission**, application packets are due to the Office

of Admissions on April 1 and to the Political Science division on May 1. For **Spring admission**, the due dates are November 1 for the Admissions Office and December 1 for the Political Science Division.

It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that all application materials are received by the deadline, including transcripts, test scores, and letters of recommendation. The Division of Political Science does not review application files until they are complete. If an application file is incomplete and the deadline passes, the applicant may request that the file be reactivated and considered for the next admission term. Unless such a request is made, the application will receive no further attention.

- **What do I submit to the Office of Admissions?**

The university requires that the following four items be submitted to the Office of Admissions to be considered for a graduate program:

- University Application for Graduate Admission
- A \$50 non-refundable application fee. The fee is good for one year.
- One official transcript (in a sealed envelope from the issuing institution) from *each* post-secondary institution attended. (A transcript from PSU is not required.)
- An applicant who has not received a degree from a U.S. college or university, and for whom English is not a native language, is required to submit results from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

- **What do I submit to the Political Science Division?**

For an application to be considered by the Political Science Division, the prospective student must submit the following documents:

- Departmental Graduate Admission Application form (this form is included with the material from the Graduate Studies Office and its web site)
- Transcripts from *each* post-secondary institution attended, including PSU. The division prefers official transcripts, but will accept unofficial ones.
- Test results from the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or the Miller's Analogy Test (MAT). More information about taking these exams is available at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_general\\_testing.html](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_general_testing.html).
- Two (or more) letters of recommendation from faculty members at colleges or universities previously attended or from others in a position to comment on the student's academic and professional background and experience.
- A 500-word statement of purpose describing academic and professional career goals,

including the political science subfields of primary interest (American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Politics, and Political Theory). The statement may also be used to provide any other additional information pertinent to the applicant's qualifications.

- Applicants required to submit TOEFL scores to the Office of Admissions should also submit them to the Division.
- A resume or curriculum vita is optional.
- Students interested in a Graduate Assistantship should include a completed application form, available at <http://www.pdx.edu/hatfieldschool/ps-grad>.

- **What does the division consider when reviewing applications?**

The Political Science Graduate Committee considers a mix of criteria for admission, in no particular order of importance: academic achievement, as indicated by the applicant's transcripts, test scores, and letters of recommendation; the likelihood of timely completion of degree requirements; extracurricular experiences and achievements; educational and career goals, especially as expressed in the applicant's statement of purpose; and the availability of Political Science faculty who can help the student achieve those goals.

There are certain minimum requirements that applicants normally must meet:

- A bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university. The degree need not be complete at the time of application, but there must be evidence that it will be complete before the first term of enrollment.
- A GPA of at least 3.0 during the junior and senior years, or a GPA of at least 3.1 for a minimum of three 4-credit graduate-level courses.
- A score of at least 550 on the TOEFL for applicants required to submit those scores.

Students who meet the minimum requirements in these three areas are not, however, guaranteed admission into the program.

- **When will I know if I have been accepted?**

The Division tries to inform applicants for Fall admission by late May and applicants for Spring admission by early December. A letter from the Division Chair will inform the applicant of the Graduate Committee's recommendation for admission, but the final decision to admit is contingent on the receipt and verification of application materials by the university's Office of Admissions.

- **Can I transfer course credits from other programs?**

Two types of previous course credit can be considered for transfer. “Pre-admission credits” are those received for coursework taken prior to admission. Some of these may be for courses taken at another institution (known as “transfer credits”). The limit on pre-admission credits (including transfer credits) is 16, which is normally four courses.

Students may also receive credit for courses taken at another institution *after* they have been admitted, although this is rare in the Political Science program. The limit on transfer credits (pre- and post-admission) is also 16.

Receiving pre-admission and transfer credits requires the submission of Form GO-21, available online at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/go-21.pdf](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/go-21.pdf).

## Financial Aid and Assistantships

- **Are there student loans for graduate students?**

Yes. Applicants interested in financial aid should submit a FAFSA (Free Application for Student Financial Aid) when they submit their applications to the Office of Admissions. All universities require the FAFSA before determining eligibility for loans, scholarships, and grants. Information is available from PSU’s Office of Financial Aid ([www.pdx.edu/finaid/](http://www.pdx.edu/finaid/)).

Two types of student loans are most common for graduate students: Federal Subsidized Stafford Loans and Federal Unsubsidized Stafford Loans. Interest on subsidized loans is paid by the Federal Government as long as the student is enrolled at least half time. Interest on unsubsidized loans accrues from the time of disbursement and become part of the student’s repayment obligation. International students are not eligible for these loans.

- **Are Graduate Assistantships available?**

Applicants are encouraged to apply for a Graduate Assistantship (the application form is at <http://www.pdx.edu/hatfieldschool/ps-grad-funding>). Graduate Assistants (GAs) work with faculty members and receive other benefits—in particular, a tuition remission and modest stipend. GAs must be registered for, and compete, at least 9 credits of coursework during each term of their appointment. More information, including tuition remission and stipend rates, as well as assistantships not supervised within the Division of Political Science, can be found online at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_gradassists.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_gradassists.php).

The deadline for applying for a GA position is May 1. GA appointments are *not* automatically renewed at the start of a new academic year. Current GAs wishing to be considered for a continuing appointment must submit a new application.

- **How much and what type of work do I do as a GA?**

GAs perform academic duties: research, teaching classes, grading, and student peer advising. They may also be asked to assist in convening conferences or seminars, draft correspondence, perform outreach activities, or other administrative tasks. GAs do not undertake personal errands for faculty members.

In the Political Science masters program, a GA appointment is some fraction of an FTE (full-time employee), which determines the hours of work required per week. For example, .15 FTE appointments require 7.5 hours of work each week; .30 FTE appointments, 15 hours. Virtually all assistantships are .15 or .30 FTE positions.

Students holding graduate assistantships may also be employed elsewhere within the university, provided the total number of hours worked does not exceed 20 hours per week (.49 FTE). For those working outside the university, the Division recommends that this same limit be observed.

- **Can I lose my Graduate Assistantship?**

Yes. Graduate Assistantships are contingent on satisfactory progress toward the degree as well as satisfactory performance as a faculty assistant. Because GAs must be registered for and complete at least 9 credits of coursework during each term of their appointment, incomplete coursework may jeopardize the student's eligibility for an assistantship. Of course, GAs must also meet the minimum 3.0 GPA requirement. See the guidelines for graduate assistantships at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_gradassists.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_gradassists.php).

At the discretion of the Graduate Committee, a GA may be reassigned to a different faculty member, normally at the start of a new term. The loss of a GA appointment does not, in itself, affect the student's standing in the degree program.

- **Are there scholarships and internships available?**

The Division of Political Science administers a small number of graduate scholarships and grants. *Ione I. Curtis Endowed Scholarships* (\$1,000) are awarded annually to one or two graduate students each year, as are *Fansler Memorial Scholarships* (\$1,000). Information about these and other scholarship and grant opportunities are posted as application deadlines approach. Information concerning other funding opportunities on campus is available from the Graduate Office at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_funding\\_scholarships.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_funding_scholarships.php).

Students are also encouraged to look off-campus for scholarship opportunities. The *American Political Science Association* lists a number of organizations and agencies that fund one or another aspect of graduate study, including at the master's level (see

[http://www.apsanet.org/section\\_191.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/section_191.cfm)). Pi Sigma Alpha, the political science honor society, also provides information about scholarships available to its members (<http://www.apsanet.org/~psa/>).

Professor Richard Clucas is the Internship Coordinator for the Division of Political Science. The Hatfield School also has an Internship Coordinator, who may be able to provide additional information on opportunities for graduate students. There are some useful websites as well (e.g., [ie3global.oregonstate.edu/employers.html](http://ie3global.oregonstate.edu/employers.html)).

- **Are there special considerations for international students?**

All graduate students are eligible to apply for Graduate Assistantships. The type of work and the hours of work required by GA appointments in Political Science are within the limits established for foreign students by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

Some scholarships have nationality requirements. If no such requirement is specified, then international students can apply. International Student and Scholar Services administers limited scholarship opportunities exclusively for international students. Information is available at [oia.pdx.edu/iss/scholarship/](http://oia.pdx.edu/iss/scholarship/).

## Entering the Program

- **Where should I get advice?**

New students are assigned a faculty advisor based on the Graduate Committee's assessment of the student's main interests and the existing distribution of advisees among the Political Science faculty. Faculty advisors and the Division's administrative staff normally serve as the main source of information about the requirements of the program and how best to achieve your educational goals. All new graduate students should begin meeting with their assigned faculty advisor early in their first term.

New students invariably receive advice, solicited or unsolicited, from other students further along in the program. This may be a source of valuable information as well, but it is no substitute for faculty advice regarding what is expected of your coursework, comprehensive examinations, and master's thesis.

When students decide on their second field of study, they should seek out a second field advisor. This advisor will assist the student in selecting the proper course work in the second field and will administer the comprehensive exam in that field.

By assigning a faculty advisor, the Graduate Committee gives new students a place to go for

information. Often an assigned faculty advisor will become the student's permanent advisor and will chair the thesis committee. But many students come to realize that their intellectual interests more closely correspond with those of another faculty member, to whom they increasingly turn for intellectual guidance and, ultimately, supervision of the master's thesis.

- **What are the course requirements?**

Students concentrate their coursework in two of the following four fields of Political Science: American Politics, International Politics, Comparative Politics, and Political Theory. Coursework also prepares students for their two comprehensive field examinations. The specific course requirements are as follows:

- PS 593 Philosophy of Social Science (4 credits)
- 20 credits (normally 5 courses) in each of two fields of concentration
  - these credits *must* include 2 seminar courses; ask your advisor which courses qualify
  - these credits *may* include up to 4 credits (normally 1 course) taken outside the discipline of political science, with the consent of your field examiner
- 6 credits of thesis research

Total: 50 credits

The MS degree also requires PS 595 (Research Methods for Political Science), passed with a grade of B– or higher. MA students must demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language. MA students who have not had at least two years of college-level instruction in a foreign language must pass an examination in one foreign language, administered by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. More information about the language proficiency requirement is available at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_general\\_foreign.html](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_general_foreign.html).

- **Can I change from an MA to an MS (or vice versa)?**

After entering the program, students may change the degree program from an MA to an MS, or vice versa, by submitting Form GO-19M, available at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/go-19m.pdf](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/go-19m.pdf). There is no deadline for this form, but it should be turned into the Office of Graduate Studies as soon as possible. The GO-19M must be processed before you apply to graduate.

- **How do I know what courses to take?**

Faculty advisors help steer students to courses that fit their interests and provide a good understanding of the discipline. Some fields include “core” classes. For example, the American Politics faculty expect that students concentrating in that field will take PS 520 (American Political Institutions). The International Politics faculty often recommend that students take either PS 541 (World Politics) or PS 542 (Contemporary Theories of World Politics). Speak to your faculty field advisors about which courses may be strongly recommended for the field exams and your thesis research.

When you complete your coursework and, in the case of MA students, satisfy your language proficiency requirement, submit Form GO-12, available at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/go-12.pdf](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/go-12.pdf).

- **If I took a 400-level course at PSU, may I take it at the 500 level?**

The short answer is: yes. The course requirements for undergraduate and graduate students are different in these courses. However, a course may not provide much additional intellectual value the second time around, in which case your faculty advisor will probably discourage you from taking it. If you do take the 500-level course after having taken it as a PSU undergraduate, you should work with the instructor to identify a substantial set of additional requirements so that the experience will be worthwhile.

- **Can course requirements be fulfilled through independent study?**

Political Science faculty normally allow independent study by having a student enroll in PS 505 (Reading and Conference). Political Science faculty approach Reading and Conference courses in different ways. Some arrangements provide for frequent meetings throughout the term to discuss the student’s progress, while others involve fewer meetings and less supervision. Whatever the arrangement, it needs to be clear to both the student and the faculty member prior to the start of the term, preferably by way of a faculty-approved written proposal from the student detailing what will be accomplished. Enroll in a Reading and Conference course by submitting a “Credit by Arrangement” form, available from the Division Office Coordinator.

Keep in mind that these courses are offered at the discretion of the faculty and therefore require a faculty signature. A maximum number of combined PS 505 and PS 501 (Research) credits that may be applied to the master’s degree is 12.

- **What happens if my grades are too low?**

University regulations state that a student must maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 3.0 and a term GPA of at least 2.7 in order to remain in good academic standing. A student failing to meet these GPA requirements is placed on “academic probation” and must meet the minimum requirements after the next 9 credits of coursework taken. Students on academic probation may not hold graduate assistantships. Information about the PSU’s policy on academic standing is available at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_general\\_standing.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_general_standing.php).

## Second Year

- **What are field exams and when do I take them?**

Comprehensive examinations are taken in both fields of concentration. They test the student’s comprehension of the chosen fields of political science, as encompassed by the student’s coursework, including Reading and Conference courses and courses for which transfer credits were granted. Traditionally, the field examination has taken the form of a 4-hour closed-book exam. However, the exact format of the exam has been left to the discretion of the faculty comprising the field. It is imperative that the student be clear on the format of the exam, the material it will cover, and the expectations for satisfactory performance.

The faculty have the option of either following the written exam with an oral exam or requiring the student to retake the comprehensive exam. Common practice has been to use the oral exam to further probe the student’s comprehension of the field when performance on the written exam was marginal, but not dismal. Prior to taking the written exam, the students may wish to have their examiners clarify the circumstances in which an oral exam or retake will be offered.

Students are encouraged to take their field exams toward the end of the term in which they will complete their coursework for the degree, or shortly thereafter (usually Fall or Winter of the second year). Arrangements for the exams should be made 4-6 weeks in advance of the proposed examination date.

The final decision about whether a student is ready to have the exam administered is left to the discretion of the student’s field advisors. Though not common, faculty may suggest additional studies and reading prior to administering the exam if it appears that the student is not adequately prepared. Students should meet with both first and second field advisors well in advance of the proposed exam date to discuss their preparation. The final decision about whether a student has passed a particular field exam is left to the field advisor in consultation with other faculty in the field. Students will be provided with written comments about their exam and the advisor’s decision.

- **What are thesis credits?**

The final requirement for the degree is the master's thesis—an original investigation that demonstrates mastery of a topic in political science and the ability to communicate this understanding to an audience of one's peers. While working on the thesis, students enroll in PS 503 to receive thesis credits. There is no upper limit on the number of thesis credits a student may take, but only 6 of those credits will apply to the degree requirements. You must be enrolled for at least one thesis credit during the term in which you expect to defend your master's thesis or paper. If financial considerations preclude you from accumulating (and paying for) unnecessary credits, then you will want to distribute the required 6 thesis credits over the terms you expect to be working on the thesis.

- **How do I defend the thesis?**

The thesis topic is chosen in consultation with the student's thesis advisors—members of the regular political science faculty who are in the best position to guide the student's research and writing. Once the student's main advisors indicate that the thesis is ready to defend, these advisors are constituted as an oral examination committee. The committee consists of three faculty members. Normally, students conduct thesis work in consultation with one primary and one secondary faculty advisor. The third member of the oral examination committee is appointed by the chair of the Division's Graduate Committee without regard to field of expertise. Sometimes a student, in consultation with the primary advisor, will elect to enlist a faculty member outside the discipline of political science to serve as the third member of the oral examination committee.

Final approval of the oral examination committee is given by the Graduate Office and must be obtained before the thesis defense by submitting Form GO-16 (available at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/newgo-16m.pdf](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/newgo-16m.pdf)).

The written thesis must also follow specific formatting guidelines and are bound and shelved in the university library (for the university's thesis guidelines, go to [www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_thesis.html](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_thesis.html)).

## Last of the Paperwork

- **What do I need to do in order to graduate?**

As the answers to these FAQs indicate, the University requires the submission of several forms at various stages during the student's degree program. Frankly, the Political Science

faculty often find it difficult to keep tabs on their advisees' paperwork requirements, so students should familiarize themselves with the requirements and see to it that the proper forms are filed at the proper times.

Each edition of the PSU *Bulletin*—available at online at <http://www.pdx.edu/oaa/psu-bulletin>—summarizes the procedures and requirements for the master's degree program (see pp. 57-68 in the 2010-2011 *Bulletin*). The Office of Graduate Studies also lists degree requirements ([www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_general\\_masters.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_general_masters.php)) and makes available the forms referenced in this FAQ ([www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_forms.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_forms.php)) as well as the due dates for filing them ([www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_general\\_deadlines.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_general_deadlines.php)).

The final form you submit is the “Application for Awarding of Master’s or Doctoral Degree,” available at [www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/degree\\_application.pdf](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/forms/degree_application.pdf). This is due on the first Friday of the term in which you will complete the last of your degree requirements (the thesis defense). If you have not yet submitted the GO-12 form, you will need to do so at the same time. The Division will submit Form GO-17M, recommending you for the master’s degree.