

PhD PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND GUIDELINES

The PhD program in political science is designed to allow students to graduate in 5-6 years of full time work. The amount of time it actually takes to finish will depend on (1) whether you go full time or part time; (2) how long it takes to finish course work, pass comps, and research and write the dissertation; (3) unforeseen events in your research and personal life.

In order to finish in a suitable amount of time, you should begin thinking about your overall program from the start.

I. Plan of Study

The **plan of study** must be filled out in consultation with the convenors in your major and minor fields and approved by the director of graduate studies (DGS) by the end of your first year. The plan of study helps you see what classes you need to take to fulfill various program requirements, set target dates for taking comps, and prepare for your dissertation research. **You will not be able to register for your third semester until the plan is approved. Fellowship students will not have their fellowship renewed until this is done.**

Plan of study forms must be completed by the student and signed by the graduate advisor. The form is available on the department's webpage (www.gwu.edu/~psc).

II. Coursework

Students should plan to take 12-15 classes (36-45 credits) before comps. **If you are a full time student, you should plan on taking two years of full time coursework and possibly a fifth semester of classes before taking comps.** The exact number of classes will depend on specific program requirements and previous coursework. If you have previously taken grad classes, they may be used to fulfill some of our subfield requirements if approved by the convenor of that subfield. This will be determined during the preparation of the plan of study.

Students should be aware that in a graduate course, it is rare for a professor to utilize the full range of the grading spectrum. A student who is doing well in the program will usually earn As and A minuses. A student whose grade point average falls below a B (3.0) will be placed on academic probation and is prohibited from graduating.

During the coursework phase, students should begin identifying potential dissertation topics and discuss with plans with potential chairs and committee members. **You should not wait until after comps to begin thinking about their dissertation research topic.**

III. Comps

Comps are offered three times a year: September, January, and May. The specific dates will be announced before the beginning of each academic year. A separate exam is given in April for graduating MA students. Four grades are possible on the comps: pass with distinction, pass, bare pass, and fail. For major field exams, a grade of pass or pass with distinction is necessary; for minor exams, a grade of bare pass or better is necessary. Students can take an exam a second time if they did not receive a passing grade on the first try. A student who fails a comprehensive exam, must retake it within 12 months of their first attempt. On no occasion may a student take an exam a third time. In addition, students may not switch their major field if they fail to pass it on the first try. Students should consult with the convenor of their subfield about the format of the exam and the scope of topics and readings you should be familiar with.

Students may begin taking comprehensive exams as soon as they feel prepared. Full time students should aim to begin taking their comps during their third year. Part time students should aim to begin their comps after having completed 45 credits.

Full time students must have sat for both their major and minor comps no later than the first comp exam of their fourth year. If a full-time student does not want to take both comps during the fall of their fourth year, they must have taken one exam during their third year. Part time students must have sat for both of their exams no later than the first sitting after having completed 54 credits. Under extenuating circumstances (e.g. health reasons, family leave, etc...), the director of graduate studies can provide an extension. If students have not taken both exams by this time, and do not have written permission from the director, it will count as a fail.

Prior to their major field oral exam, a student should prepare a page two page summary of their dissertation project. It may be discussed at the oral exam, but it will not be part of the grade. The purpose of this conversation is to encourage students to begin thinking about their dissertation topic while taking classes and especially while preparing for comps.

IV. Dissertation Prospectus

By the time they finish comps, students should have some firm ideas about dissertation topics and move quickly toward defense of a prospectus. The specific expectations of what a prospectus should include will vary a bit between subfields and among faculty members, but at a minimum the prospectus should identify the main research question, its theoretical significance, the research methods you will use, the type of data you will rely upon or create, and a timeline for finishing the research and writing of the dissertation. Examples of recently approved prospectuses will be available on the department website.

Students must defend their dissertation prospectus no later than the semester after they have passed their second comprehensive exam. Extensions are possible only with the joint recommendation of the committee chair and the director of graduate studies. At the very latest, students must be done with all program requirements other than the dissertation by the time they have accumulated 63 credits (for full time students, this is halfway through your fourth year). At this point, you will be advanced to candidacy, aka,

ABD (all but dissertation) status. Students who are not able to meet this target must consult with the director of graduate studies and receive permission to extend this target. Failure to follow this schedule can result in a variety of consequences, including suspension of fellowships or possibly, termination from the program.

A prospectus defense form must be completed by the student and signed by the committee. The form is available on the department's webpage (www.gwu.edu/~psc). The student should bring the form to their defense.

V. Outside Funding for Dissertation Research

While developing the prospectus, you should investigate outside sources of research funding, such as the National Science Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Fulbright Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Smith Richardson Foundation, among many others. Securing outside funding is one of several important forms of external validation that can help a student on the academic job market. Outside funding is particularly valuable for students who anticipate needing to do field work as part of their dissertation research. Foundations normally have templates to follow for grant applications. These templates are also suitable for preparing the prospectus.

Many foundations have only one or two application deadlines each year. If you plan ahead to submit grant applications at the same time as the dissertation prospectus, you will be more likely to remain on track. Missing grant deadlines, in contrast, may also delay your research and the completion of the dissertation.

VI. Degree Candidacy

Normally a student will advance to candidacy immediately following the successful defense of their dissertation prospectus. To be considered eligible for promotion to candidacy, students must meet the following requirements:

- pass their major field comprehensive examination with satisfactory pass or higher, and must pass their minor field comprehensive examination with a bare pass or higher;
- have taken at least 48 hours of graduate credit in the program;
- approval of a dissertation prospectus by a committee of at least three faculty;
- fulfillment of all other degree requirements (such as research tools and methods).

In addition, student's performance in coursework must indicate probable success at the dissertation stage. Passing examinations at the minimum level does not necessarily provide this indication.

An advancement to candidacy form must be completed by the student. The form is available on the department's webpage (www.gwu.edu/~psc).

