

# **The Challenges and Advantages for Seasoned Professionals**

## **Applying to and Navigating Doctoral Programs**

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### **Introduction**

Although positive attempts have been made to assess the gender, racial, and ethnic composition of incoming doctoral students (e.g., APSA 2018), we know very little as a discipline about the breadth and depth of professional experience that applicants bring to their graduate studies. Most incoming Ph.D. students are either direct pathway students (coming straight from undergraduate studies) or have taken a year or two in the workforce before starting graduate school (Mosyjowski et al. 2017). Students with significant work experience (greater than five years) returning to pursue a doctoral degree (i.e., returning students) are the exception rather than the norm. These seasoned professionals generally encounter different challenges than students who matriculate directly or soon after undergraduate study.

As they consider graduate school, seasoned practitioners may have to weigh opportunity costs, financial considerations, cultural re-entry issues, work-life balance, familial and community obligations, among other factors. Beyond these tradeoffs, prospective students with extensive applied experience will also have to navigate the application process, take the GRE, secure letters of recommendation, and evaluate different departmental environments. Despite these challenges, seasoned pros can leverage their experience, skills, maturity, and professionalism when applying, executing coursework, establishing research agendas, and connecting the dots between the theoretical and applied worlds of politics. Indeed, doctoral students with ample work experience offer something special to academic units and political

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science as a whole in terms of having a broader perspective applying real-world political experiences to higher education.

We hope this chapter serves as a resource detailing “what we wish we knew then” when we applied for and attended graduate school as seasoned professionals. Collectively, we three authors amassed 36 years of practitioner experience in the public, nonprofit, and for-profit arenas before deciding to pursue doctoral degrees and become academicians. One of us worked at the White House and in the federal bureaucracy. One of us labored with local and state governments. And one of us spent time with international nonprofits and a publicly-traded global company. Of course, these musings reflect our finite experiences. Others with different intersectional identities may testify to divergent accounts and offer distinctive guidance. Still, we provide some suggestions for seasoned professionals as they consider Ph.D. applications, navigate graduate studies, and contribute to their academic departments.

## **Deciding to Pursue a Doctoral Degree and Navigating the Application Process**

Deciding to leave the workforce after an extended tenure and pursue a Ph.D. is no simple quandary. There are multiple considerations to weigh. For instance, there are opportunity costs to changing careers. Seasoned professionals may be near or at the peak of their careers. Many have already completed a terminal master’s or J.D. Professionally, they have built a reputation, established a network, gained valuable applied skills, and made recognizable contributions to their industries. Opting to earn a doctoral degree may mean surrendering these hard-won connections and positions of influence. It can be humbling to go from having a personal office, benefitting from an assistant, managing subordinates, or serving as the point person on multiple projects to starting anew as a student. The authors of this chapter experienced such whiplash as we went from the White House, a governor’s office, and corporate boardrooms to being students without a title and sharing office space.

There are financial considerations too. Becoming a pupil again will likely result in a sizable pay cut, an extended pause in retirement contributions, and a loss of other pecuniary perks and benefits. The average graduate student stipend in political science ranges from \$14,000 to \$30,000 per year (ProFellow

2020). As a result, students may have to take out education loans to cover the cost of living, childcare, or other financial obligations. All of these monetary sacrifices may not be worth it to some considering that the average salary for assistant professors is \$67,000 per year (Zippia 2021), with Research 1 universities paying more and lower-tier public universities and liberal arts colleges compensating less. Still, your doctorate may carry more value in the governmental and private sectors.

Beyond these tangible costs are intangible ones, such as culture and work-life balance. Doctoral studies are a significant undertaking. Sixty-hour work weeks are common. Little time is left for family, friends, and extracurricular activities. Most students take five to seven years to complete their degrees. In addition, academia lends itself to a set of highly intelligent but highly critical individuals. Such spaces replete with high achieving individuals can make for a difficult environment to shine and thrive. Being at the top of your game in industry will not necessarily translate to success in higher education. All of this makes for a mentally, emotionally, and physically taxing journey. We further discuss the practical and cultural challenges for seasoned professionals seeking a Ph.D. later in this chapter.

However, pursuing a doctorate has many advantages as well. A mid-career transition may be a welcomed and needed change for one's self-actualization, priorities, and goals. Moreover, universities are centers of rich intellectual stimulation and innovation. It is an extraordinary privilege to be paid (albeit a minimal amount) to learn, teach, and research—all to build new knowledge and advance the discipline. Graduate studies also offer schedule flexibility which may suit one's preferred lifestyle, familial responsibilities, or personal circumstances. As we highlight later in the chapter, there are ways to leverage your professional experience to benefit your academic pursuits. Ultimately, we believe the career change was worth the opportunity costs, but we understand if others make different calculations. Regardless, this decision is more than a job change, and we strongly encourage prospective doctoral students to fully evaluate the tradeoffs in the context of one's personal circumstances to decide what is best.

Once you have decided to pursue doctoral studies, you can turn your attention to identifying where and how to apply. For starters, you may need to (re-)take the GRE. Fortunately, a fair number of programs are abandoning the GRE requirement because standardized tests are not good predictors of

academic success and are especially punitive for low-income students, many of whom are disproportionately people of color. Still, most programs require GRE scores to assess applicants' verbal, quantitative, or writing abilities. Of course, working full-time may not afford much free time to study for the GRE. Despite the commitment and cost, we recommend enrolling in a GRE-prep course. It provides structured practice and teaches strategies to efficiently and effectively answer questions, especially for those more distant from their undergraduate test-taking years. Moving up a few percentiles in GRE results could mean the difference between admittance or not, or a university fellowship or not. GRE scores may be an especially important heuristic for admission committees as they are not always able to objectively and consistently assess professional experience (King et al. 2008; Posselt 2014; Jackman 2017; Michel et al. 2019).

Determining where to apply may require weighing geographic, partner, familial, financial, or other considerations. Direct-pathway students tend to have greater flexibility in applying to the highest-ranked programs where they are competitive and can field competing offers.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, seasoned professionals are typically older and more likely to be in long-term relationships, expectant or current parents, have a mortgage and significant financial commitments, or have established social networks or long-term community ties. These obligations make it challenging to cast a wide net. Anecdotally, each chapter author here only applied to two programs at most. Importantly, the decision to pursue a doctoral degree does not affect you alone. Instead, the pursuit will likely impact your partner, child(ren), family members, or friends. Therefore, robust communication about the positives and negatives of earning a Ph.D. with the key people in your life is essential.

Nonetheless, applicants with an extensive resume can leverage their professional experience when writing their personal and research essays. These statements are sales pitches for the value add you will bring to the department, university, and discipline. It is worth the effort to help admission committees connect your applied experience and academic goals. For example, experience fundraising or managing

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<sup>4</sup> The late Tom Carsey (2020) offers some excellent advice for deciding among different doctoral programs.

budgets may benefit you in applying for research grants. Time spent working in a legislative office or lobbying affords you a front-row seat to better understand the practical aspects of the policymaking process. Working as an attorney gives insights into judicial decision making. Years dedicated to international sales and marketing are an excellent primer for research in the international political economy. A long-term stint with a foreign aid agency has readied you to study comparative politics. Professionalism, maturity, executive function, substantive understanding, and applied skills are valuable in higher education. Seasoned professionals should highlight their lived and professional experiences, articulating how such knowledge has made them see political and policy phenomena of interest in new ways. Doing this well may yield admittance along with a university scholarship, fellowship, or more competitive aid package.

A final piece of the application process is securing letter-of-recommendation writers. Programs typically require at least three strong references. While it certainly is acceptable to ask one or two members of your professional network to submit a letter on your behalf, at least one letter writer should be a faculty member from your undergraduate, master's, or law school studies. Depending on the amount of time since graduation, this may be more challenging for some than others. If you are able, it is wise to maintain regular contact (i.e., checking in at least once a year) with an academic mentor. Even if it has been an extended time, it is worth reaching out to a professor you admired and performed well for, reminding them of your academic excellence, and updating them on your current endeavors. If you do most of the work of summarizing your past and recent accolades for them, and how your experience in their class shaped the perspective you'll bring to graduate study, they will be more likely to commit to writing the letter.

Whether you are admitted into one or more programs, we encourage you to attend open houses and meet with departmental faculty and other doctoral students. During these visits, you can get a sense of the departmental culture. You may be able to negotiate your financial package, securing additional dollars or guaranteed summer funding. You may want to assess how many other doctoral students bring extensive work experience to the table. It might help if you inquired how professional and lived

experiences are valued by faculty. You could ask about program expectations and flexibility concerning your other obligations and commitments. Finally, you should determine whether you can find or foster the community of peers and support you will need to weather a long, exacting, and worthwhile journey.

## **Challenges for Seasoned Professionals**

Once you have decided to enter a Ph.D. program, returning students face a different set of challenges than their direct pathway peers, but they also enjoy some key advantages. Challenges that we have identified for older students are both practical and cultural. Practically, many returning students have more demands on their personal time than direct pathway students. Many are married or partnered off, and may have children or parents to care for. Many seasoned professionals also have entrenched financial or community commitments. Such obligations can present additional time management challenges when juggling the intense pressure and workload of a Ph.D. program. Given the profile of typical doctoral students, most Ph.D. programs are not designed to accommodate these added responsibilities and thus may not offer the same resources a traditional workplace would. Therefore, we recommend investigating the culture and formal support options available in a program for your circumstances.

These practical considerations are also coupled with cultural challenges for seasoned professionals returning to academia. Returning students can be significantly older than their cohort peers, perhaps even ten to twenty years older. Because of the age gap and likely unshared interests, it can be challenging to make friends, bond as a group, and persevere through difficult coursework and comprehensive exams. While Ph.D. work is largely individualized, the early years of study can necessitate intense collaboration within the cohort to succeed. Returning students can sometimes feel on the periphery of the cohort due to the age gap and cultural displacement, making the first couple of years potentially more isolating.

Another conceivable cultural challenge for returning students is interacting with and working for faculty that are in fact their age peers. Returning students are professionals, but faculty may not be aware of their extensive career experience, achieved skillsets, or knowledge base. Beyond that, a large power

gap exists between students and faculty. This can leave some faculty (and other graduate students) not fully recognizing or utilizing the talents and perspectives of these returning students.

Further, returning students with real-world professional experience often witness a surprising disconnect between theories in political science and applied realities of the political arena. How politics is practiced is more nuanced than summative regression analyses. The ivory tower can sometimes engage in too many thought experiments devoid the benefit of reality. Seasoned professionals can offer substantive insights on political institutions and behavior, provide historical context, propose more valid measures, or offer concrete examples to buttress or refute key theories. Returning students can help bridge that gap, but only if faculty and other graduate students are open to this practical experience.

## **Advantages for Seasoned Professionals**

In spite of these practical and cultural challenges, seasoned professionals enjoy some advantages over their younger peers. A Ph.D. program is long and grueling for most students, regardless of age. Many direct pathway students are exemplar students, making graduate studies a sensible choice. With this success, however, can come mental anguish particularly if the student is struggling with a course, comprehensive exams, a dissertation, or other service responsibilities. Many direct pathway students' identities are tied to their academic performance. It can be shocking, even debilitating for some to receive poor marks, encounter significant criticism from faculty, or experience failure. Most students that drop out of doctoral programs are direct pathway students (Gross and Peters 2021) for a host of reasons, but having one's confidence married to school performance can be hard on a student's psychological wellbeing.

Of course, returning students also experience criticism, failure, and challenges in graduate school. But, generally, these students have greater maturity, a more solidified sense of self, and past experience to shoulder faculty criticism or program challenge with less mental anguish. Being chastised in the halls of Congress, losing a legal case, failing to close a large sale, or other such events can steel returning students for possible admonitions. Additionally, since returning students are proven professionals, it can be easier

for them to treat graduate studies like a job and set healthy work boundaries. Likewise, returning students made the choice to return to academia. This deliberate decision can help returning students persevere even when the immediate woes of data collection or the marathon of dissertation writing can seem daunting. Studies show that doctoral students with extensive industry experience tend to harbor greater motivation and drive for their research agenda (Mosyjowski 2017). Having a long-term outlook and keeping life in perspective can serve as an asset for returning students over their direct pathway peers.

One of the challenges of graduate school for all students is carving out individual space for research and contributions to the field. Professional experience offers returning students unique opportunities to develop distinct research perspectives, withstand the peculiarities of the academic work environment, and establish leadership roles in the classroom and professional organizations.

Seasoned professionals bring a wealth of insight into addressing one of political science's main issues: measuring and understanding political and social phenomena. In many ways, professional experience is lived in the gap between rules and systems as they are written and as they are experienced. Years working in a local government, for a non-profit, or on the Hill not only produce a network of contacts who are willing to sit for interviews or aid research efforts, but they also yield an understanding of data and the processes that produce such evidence.

Many of us who have encountered academic research before entering academia have experienced reading a journal article and questioning the authors' understanding of budget data, committee votes, or policy cases. Or, if the authors do have a handle on the topic, the writing can be esoteric or difficult for non-academics to engage. It can be difficult to remember during the disorienting socialization process of graduate school, but your experience is the base of a robust foundation for scholarship. Moreover, your experience writing for a lay audience is an advantage. We recommend maintaining some contact with your network and colleagues outside of higher education throughout your doctoral studies as a reminder of the value your experience can add to your academic endeavors and deep understanding of the political world.



This hard-earned knowledge and professional networks also make life easier in the classroom. While anecdotes are only singular data points, they are invaluable in finding ways for students to connect applied political phenomena and their own experience to larger theories and concepts. Sharing examples of how things “really work” illustrates the tradeoffs required in governing and the value and limitations of political science in explaining real-world decisions and results. For direct-pathway students, those examples can take years to develop, but as a seasoned professional, you have access to those cases and can more easily adapt to what resonates best with students.

You can also easily tap professional networks to bring in speakers or guests that can give different perspectives or offer additional connections to classroom material. For people who are accustomed to work that is more communal or positively impacts the community, the individualism of graduate study can be especially difficult. Teaching offers an opportunity to maintain that aspect of your professional skillset and continue to contribute beyond research.

Finally, there are other advantages to entering graduate school with experience in professional settings. Compared to traditional workplaces, academia will likely be a culture shock. There may be limited supervisory oversight, few personnel policies, or great freedom for tenured faculty. One-on-one interactions often occur with large power imbalances and little supervision, and classroom environments are largely subject to individual faculty preferences. In this context, harassment and other toxic behaviors can be prevalent and difficult to address. Direct pathway students may not even recognize the severity of a problem without past examples to serve as a comparison. However, seasoned professionals likely have experience navigating, or even administering systems of accountability in large organizations. They also presumably have a better understanding of what is and is not acceptable in professional interactions. This can allow you to take a leadership role in addressing harmful situations and creating healthier cultures, using tools gained outside of academia to facilitate discussions and foster accountability within units and throughout the profession.

## **Conclusion: Beyond Graduate School & Final Thoughts**

Deciding to embark on the strenuous, though rewarding, adventure of doctoral education is a major decision for any student. But it is especially so for seasoned professionals. The opportunity costs of leaving an established career to begin anew in an academic setting can be daunting. The three of us succeeded in making the transition and are glad that we did, but we all faced quite different challenges than direct pathway students during the application process and navigating graduate school. We have tried to enumerate some of the cultural and personal challenges that seasoned professionals may encounter in pursuing academic work and encourage you to think about what your future goals are and how obtaining a Ph.D. is beneficial for your long-term plans.

Most academic departments define their success by how many of their Ph.D. graduates place in a tenure-line post at a Research 1 university. However, there are other options for political science Ph.D.s. For example, think tanks, consulting companies, data science organizations, advocacy groups, policymakers, governmental agencies, private firms, and many other entities welcome trained political scientists. Academia is not the only path. And with universities trimming their budgets, reducing the number of available tenure-track lines, and turning to non-permanent faculty to fill the gaps, an array of options is available. Many of these alternative options offer flexibility and opportunities to seasoned professionals for successful careers after graduate school.

In the final analysis, the three of us made big choices and gambled in some ways with our careers in pivoting out of established positions into the unknowns of academia. For all of us, the sacrifice was worth it. Higher education is less about spending 40 hours chained to a desk than about the intellectual freedom to create new knowledge, focus on meaningful societal challenges, touch students' lives. It is always tempting to think about "what if" and "where would I be" had we chosen not to pursue Ph.D.s. But even though the road was arduous, the journey has been worth it. We wish all seasoned professionals considering this path adequate space for deep reflection in deciding whether or not to pursue a political science doctoral degree.

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