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*Applying for Advanced Degrees:*

You want to go on to graduate school. It is very important that you apply to the right place, that is, the place that is best for you. In order to figure that out, it may help to think through some questions:

*General Comments for Any Program:*

**Learn:** This may seem obvious but many people go onto advanced programs because they finished their BA and this ‘seems like the next thing to do.’ Others do it because they expect that they will be better paid with an MA than with just a BA or because certain labor markets are closed to people with only a BA. Labor markets change and while choosing a program for advanced study is part of a series of career decisions, you should choose a program because you are interested in learning about a particular subject or what to study it in a particular way. If this underlying motivation is missing, you will have a difficult time surviving and flourishing in a program.

**Social:** One of the most important aspects of any program is the social aspect. You are no longer one of thousands of undergraduates but are one of a handful of a few people who are studying similar issues and will likely run into each other (in other words, review each other’s applications for future grants, jobs, review papers for journals, perhaps even marry each other) for the rest of your lives. Everyone around you is a colleague.

**Skills**: Each program has certain areas where it is especially strong. Make sure you get the most out of the program by studying strength areas in addition to your own interests. Remember, regardless of what content or discipline you study (Political Science, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Political Theory), you may wind up doing some work or pursuing a career in something quite different. So it is important to gain the skills that will help you in different fields. Specifically, take advantage of the opportunities that emerge to develop the following:

 *Writing*: try to write in different genres (blog, review essays, literature reviews, white papers, academic papers)

 Learn how to write grant proposals

 Take the opportunity to edit and comment on the work of your peers where possible

 *Language*: you may enter a program monolingual but should not leave that way. Depending on the length of the program and the amount of background you have in languages, try to make sure you have ‘working knowledge’ of at least two languages other than English. This does not mean that you should try to learn ‘in demand’ languages like Chinese and Farsi while earning an MA in one year and a half. All languages are ‘useful’ and the experience of learning language is formative in many ways.

 *Methodological Skills*: This term means very different things to different people. Scholars and practitioners use a variety of different methodologies in cataloguing, measuring, and analyzing data. Make sure you learn as much as possible about research design, case study selection, qualitative, interpretive, and quantitative methods. Again, certain programs will have greater strength in certain areas and you should take advantage of this.

 *Discipline, responsibility*: These terms are even more vague but no less necessary. You are likely to ask people for letters of reference. You may be offered opportunities to contribute to the research and/or grant projects of scholars in the programs you attend. You need to respond to emails promptly, turn in good work when it is due, make sure you offer thoughtful comments. People often think that the brilliant academic working in his or her cave and emerging periodically with an *opus* is the model for all scholarly work. Quite the opposite. Almost everything that works its way into the regular production of scholarship, grants, and white papers meets mundane deadlines, is reviewed by various people, gets fact checked, and so on. Working with others means you need to be professional, disciplined, and responsible with your time and the time of others. What will a professor, for whom you handed in late papers, write in a letter of reference for you? If you cannot hand in a 15 page final paper on time, will you be able to complete a dissertation in the requisite time?

*Here are some more specific comments that I hope will be useful as you think about MA and Ph.D programs. Please note, some of the comments that apply for MA programs apply also to Ph.D programs, so do read both set of suggestions if you are interested in Ph.D programs.*

What Factors Contribute to Your Decision to Apply to an MA program?

**Location:** In that case, you should think about why a program in this particular city (or college town) and country will help you experience what you desire- greater linguistic or cultural fluency, to develop social ties, to deepen and extend professional networks. You may flourish much better in a particular environment or you might want to challenge yourself by trying a very different type of place. The first semester (if not year) of graduate study is often both exhilarating and traumatic. So you want to make sure you are somewhere where you will be able to handle these challenges. Finally, generally students do internships and pursue their first post-degree jobs in the immediate vicinity of where they studied. This is not simply a matter of choice but also opportunity. So try to pick a place that can be home for several years.

**Professionalization:** If the MA should help you get a better job or further solidify your professional credentials, you might consider an MA on the basis of the specializations that it offers, how well recognized the program is in the professional field you want to work, what sort of professionalization and internship programs it has, what sort of jobs graduates of the program get.

**Continue Pursuing Academic Interests:** You should make sure that it offers courses in your area regularly, has a number of professors with similar interests, is in a physical environment where extra-curricular opportunities can enrich your study. Importantly, remember that undergraduate education largely introduces you to the study of things themselves (diplomacy, coups, democratization) and master’s education generally moves in a more professional direction (not entirely a how-to approach but it a mixture of higher levels of abstraction and more case application).

**Funding:** Funding is rare in MA programs. Sometimes funding is available for students who have skills that are necessary for certain units of the university (such as advising, residential services, or certain institutes) but departments rarely have funding available for incoming students. Once in a program, students may be able to find funding as a grader or teaching assistant. You should also consider external (to the MA program, that is) scholarships or fellowships.

Preparation for a PhD program?

In that case, you should think about what within the field you would like to study and with whom you will study at that program? What courses the program offers and who is likely to write a letter of reference for a future PhD application.

What factors contribute to your decision to apply to a PhD program?

**Location:** See the comments above. Additionally, some PhD programs have exchange programs with other PhD programs in the general area. You should check and see if you can take courses at other local PhD programs. Another important issue to consider is where you will study. While it is common for US universities to accept students with a BA to a PhD program, many European universities do not do this. So make sure that you ‘qualify’ for the program to which you are applying.

**Professionalization:** PhDs generally prepare you most for a career as an academic although increasingly, governments and nongovernmental organizations value (and expect) PhDs. You should think about what content you will study and what skills you will learn in the process of your PhD. There is great variation in programs in these areas. Importantly, there does not seem to be a significant increase in the number of tenured lines in universities in the United States. That does not mean that you will not be able to find a good job when you finish, but you need to think carefully about why you want to be a professor (if that is what you want). If you are most interested in research, you might be better off thinking of a career in thinktanks or in government or NGOs, because there are not many research universities. Obviously, some research that might be valued in one environment might not be in the other. So you need to consider this in terms of your choices. If you are most interested in teaching, you might want to make sure you develop additional skills that would make you marketable to a university (experience in advising, administration, curriculum development, and so on).

**Continue Pursuing Academic Interests:** You should make sure that it offers courses in your area regularly, has a number of professors with similar interests, is in a physical environment where extra-curricular opportunities can enrich your study. Remember that doctoral study often is highly abstract, focusing on the mental models that we use to study the phenomena that we learned about as undergraduate and MA students. People with PhDs generally produce research for highly specialized audiences who are often more concerned about how research supports or challenges a theory than whether it offers new information or immediately applicable policy prescriptions. Again, this is not true of all subfield nor is it true of all programs. So it is important to get to know the programs to which you are applying.

**Funding:** Traditionally, Ph.D programs provide coverage for tuition and an additional stipend for most if not all of their students. This may not be enough to ‘live on’ and you will need to consider how this may impact you (this especially depends on where you study). As mentioned above, once you enter a program it is somewhat easier to find funding that from sources outside of the department or program.