Master’s Program in Political Science:
Student Handbook

Division of Political Science
Mark O. Hatfield School of Government
www.hatfieldschool.pdx.edu/political-science

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Welcome to the Master’s Program in Political Science at Portland State University! We are glad to have you join us and hope that you will be successful in your studies here. This document provides answers to the most frequently asked questions about our program. 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 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. Students will be exposed to literature in two fields of political science of their choosing, take comprehensive exams in each field, and complete a thesis-length piece of original research while enrolled. We pride ourselves on both the rigor of our coursework and the opportunities for close interactions between faculty and students. Most faculty have only two or three assigned master’s advisees at a time. This allows for some flexibility in designing a program that is best suited to your interests.

Structure of 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 coursework 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. Changing your field advisor is perfectly acceptable, assuming your new advisor agrees.

• 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
  • information about which course fits with which field can be found here: http://www.pdx.edu/hatfieldschool/mps-fields
□ 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.

• 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.pdx.edu/ogs/forms. 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.
Choosing Courses

• **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, you should be able to run a DARS report to see whether you have satisfied all of the requirements. You can find more information about the DARS system here: [www.pdx.edu/ogs/dars](http://www.pdx.edu/ogs/dars).

• **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 [http://www.pdx.edu/ogs/academic-stand-ing-policy](http://www.pdx.edu/ogs/academic-standing-policy).

- **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.pdx.edu/ogs/forms).

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.pdx.edu/ogs/thesis-and-dissertation-information).
• **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](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.pdx.edu/ogs/procedures-masters-degrees](http://www.pdx.edu/ogs/procedures-masters-degrees)) and makes available the forms referenced in this FAQ ([www.pdx.edu/ogs/forms](http://www.pdx.edu/ogs/forms)) as well as the due dates for filing them ([www.pdx.edu/ogs/graduate-candidate-deadlines](http://www.pdx.edu/ogs/graduate-candidate-deadlines)).

The final form you submit is the “Application for Awarding of Master’s or Doctoral Degree,” available at [www.pdx.edu/ogs/forms](http://www.pdx.edu/ogs/forms). 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.