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Show Me the Money: Information, Strategies, and Guidelines for Applying to External Grants and Fellowships in Graduate School

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Introduction

Political science graduate students are encouraged to apply to *external grants* and *fellowships* during their academic careers. These grants and fellowships provide a myriad of benefits for applicants, including not only access to financial and institutional resources but also the opportunity to further clarify and improve your research agenda. However, identifying and applying to these external grants and fellowships is not always clear. In this chapter, we provide an overview of what external grants and fellowships are and the different purposes they serve, a snapshot of the awards themselves and how they may fit into the timeline of your graduate career, a discussion of the barriers and trade-offs you might encounter when applying, and a set of personal anecdotes delineating what the process entails.

What Are External Grants and Fellowships?

External grants and fellowships are awarded from an entity that is not your home institution. These awards are available from an array of institutions and offices, including research centers, private organizations, governments, think tanks, professional associations, and nonprofit organizations. Generally, fellowships are awarded to people, and grants are awarded to projects.

Applying to and successfully securing an external grant or fellowship is useful for a handful of reasons. First and foremost, external grants and fellowships provide you with the support you need to progress and advance your dissertation; this can include achieving language proficiency, conducting initial or primary-stage fieldwork, or completing your dissertation (for additional information, see chapters 15 and 20 on the dissertation and fieldwork, respectively). Second, external grants and fellowships may provide you with invaluable access to mentoring and networking opportunities by exposing you to potential colleagues, such as researchers or policymakers. Third, applying to external grants and fellowships may ultimately improve your understanding and explanation of your research agenda by providing you with opportunities to practice your descriptive writing skills and refining your narratives after receiving constructive feedback and successfully securing funding. Lastly, grants and fellowships signal a successful academic record. To be competitive on the job market, you need to display evidence of successfully obtaining and managing funding sources for your research; obtaining external grants and fellowships can signal a degree of professionalism and a third-party's support for your research agenda.

Pulling Back the Curtain on Fellowships and Grants

Regardless of your subfield or research interests, there are a wide array of fellowship and grants available to support you at different stages in your graduate career. Before pursuing an external grant or fellowship, you should consider the purpose that the grant or fellowship will serve and your overall eligibility. For what do you need the funding? How much is needed? When is the funding needed? By answering these questions, you can identify the type of grant or fellowship needed, the specific amount you may receive, and whether a specific grant or fellowship is appropriate for your needs.

Table 23.1 below provides a brief overview of external grants and fellowships according to the career stage for which the source is most useful and the general purposes they serve. We include specific examples in each category. While this is in no way an exhaustive list, the table should provide you with a general idea of what external grants and fellowships are available for you at different stages of your career.

Table 23.1: Stages, Purpose, Types, and Examples of External Grants and Fellowships

Stage in Graduate Career	Purpose	Award Type	Examples
Early-stage student	Preparation, relocation, personal moving costs, preparation for a new program, stipend	Fellowship	APSA Diversity Fellowship*
Early or mid-stage student	Long-term graduate training and support	Fellowship, grant	Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship*, National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GFRP)
Early and mid-stage students and early candidates	Support for dissertation- relevant work: fieldwork, language training, data collecting and processing	Fellowship, grant	SSRC International Dissertation Research Fellowship, APSA Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grants (DDRIG), Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, American Institute for Southeast European Studies Graduate/Postdoctoral Fellowship, Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy Grant
Candidates	Dissertation completion, preparation for job market, contribution to another project, networking and professionalization	Fellowship, grant, pre-doctoral position	American Association of Women Dissertation Fellowship, Harry Frank Guggenheim Emerging Scholar Award, Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowships, United States Institute of Peace Peace Scholar Fellowship
Any stage	Attend workshops and conferences; obtain additional methodological, technical, and language training	Grant	APSA Lee Ann Fujii Travel Grant, ISA Travel Grant, ICPSR Attendance Grant
Any stage	Service, policy analysis, publication	Fellowship, grant	APSA Public Scholarship Program Fellowship, Janne Nolan Nuclear Security Visiting Fellow at the Truman Center for National Policy

*Requires identification with one or more historically underrepresented groups in the academy.

Barriers and Trade-Offs

When applying to external grants and fellowships, you should consider the barriers and trade-offs you may face in the application process and once funding is secured. In this section, we review potential restraints in terms of timing and eligibility, and draw attention to strategies for attenuating the effects and implications thereof.

Barriers to the Application Process

External grants and fellowships often include distinct requirements and objectives as part of the application process. In these cases, eligibility may be restricted to a specific stage of academic career, or

you may be expected to complete a certain set of criteria by the end of the award period. Some external awards may target applicants from specific (historically underrepresented) groups, depending upon one's socio-economic, racial/ethnic, gender, sexual, citizenship, or caretaker status. Other external funding sources may require research projects that focus on specialized topics (e.g., peacebuilding in post-conflict societies, the political behavior of racial and ethnic minorities, or experimental research in the Global South.)

First-time applicants may overlook or misinterpret what these requirements mean and entail; those from historically underrepresented groups, for example, may be doubly-disadvantaged as they navigate complicated application processes in addition to discovering the “hidden curriculum” of norms, soft skills, and informal knowledge that often makes applying to grants and fellowships much easier (Barham and Wood 2021; Calarco 2020). For example, students from underrepresented backgrounds are often expected to “trauma-dump” in their application statements in order to demonstrate their resilience and ability to persevere, despite their circumstances (Megginson 2021). This may pressure applicants from underrepresented groups to provide deep, emotionally exhausting personal experiences to demonstrate “worthiness” when applying. To mitigate these effects and develop strong applications, we suggest you reach out to advisors and mentors, senior graduate students, past (successful) applicants, or colleagues with similar backgrounds for assistance in writing application narratives. We furthermore suggest that applicants receive feedback on their materials from scholars who mirror potential reviewers.

To apply to certain external grants and fellowships, you must be at a certain stage in your graduate career. Some funding sources may restrict applications to pre-candidacy graduate students or to those with certain degree statuses. A common example of this is the NSF Graduate Research Fellowships Program (NSF GRFP). Others may only be available to individuals further along in their studies. For instance, dissertation completion fellowships, such as the APSA Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant (APSA DDRIG), require applicants to have completed and passed their comprehensive exams and dissertation prospectus defense before applying. Other advanced funding sources, such as predoctoral fellowships, may require applicants to demonstrate that they have made significant progress on their dissertation research. This may be demonstrated, for example, through either dissertation chapter(s) or stand-alone article(s) (for additional information, see chapter 15 on the dissertation). It is thus important to confirm your eligibility before beginning the application process.

Importantly, external grant and fellowship applications often take a significant amount of time to complete. When applying, you must consider if you can allocate your time efficiently to manage the workload of applying to a number of funding sources. For example, almost all applications require approval from an applicant's advisor or an endorsement from your graduate school. The former may simply require a signature, which may be received within a day, while the latter may require a submission of the full application to your graduate institution's fellowship office or equivalent for approval, which may take a week or more to obtain. Additionally, some applications require only a few supporting documents outlining your projects, while others require several statements justifying the dissertation, detailing the work to be completed during the funding period, and so forth. To streamline the workflow, create a work plan with the fellowship/grant's information and application requirements, deadlines, and stages of submission. This system will serve as a quick “go-to” guide as you go back and forth between applications. Rank-order and prioritize the grants and fellowships from which you will benefit the most. This allows you to strategically allocate your (limited) time when applying to funding sources you desire or require the most.

Trade-Offs After Successfully Securing an External Grant or Fellowship

The trade-offs you face after securing external funding are just as important as barriers to application. We outline the two most common impacts that grants and fellowships may have on you and your work.

First is the effect external grants or fellowships have on your institutional responsibilities. You may serve as a research or teaching assistant during your graduate career, as stipulated in the funding package that accompanied your acceptance letter (for additional information about teaching assistantships, see chapter 28). Securing a large external grant or fellowship may, however, “buy out” your requirements by supplanting the stipend and tuition rates that your assistantships ordinarily cover. This may be beneficial

in that it allows you more time to focus on your own research; it may, however, be disadvantageous in that it prevents you from accessing these additional forms of professionalization. We therefore recommend that you take into consideration how awarded grants or fellowships affect your preexisting duties.

Second are the requirements that a grant or fellowship may present during or following the award period. Specifically, funders may require recipients to provide a set of outputs for their institution. For example, you may be asked to present your ongoing research at a conference or symposium during the award period. You may also be required to brief funders regularly on your research progress, as laid out in the application or letter of acceptance. This is the case for Peace Scholars serving at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Others may require you to provide a report or share a (academic or non-academic) publication at the end of their fellowship or grant period. The Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy, for example, has historically required grant recipients to provide evidence that they defended their dissertation, published their funded research in a peer-reviewed journal, or received an invitation to publish their funded research in a book (Horowitz n.d.). These requirements are often valuable and highly sought-after, as they provide researchers with unique opportunities to connect with policymakers or other researchers or advance their careers. However, in some instances – for example, during the early stage of your research or during periods of extensive fieldwork abroad – it may be difficult to meet these obligations. You should therefore consider how the requirements of the fellowship or grant fit into your timeline and impact your other obligations.

Personal Experiences

In this section we provide four of our personal experiences applying for and securing external funding as PhD students or candidates. We demonstrate strategies taken to secure funding based on the career timing, institutional status, and background of the authors.

Securing At-Large Funding to Conduct Candidate-Level Research

As a PhD candidate, one of your primary duties includes conducting independent research to move your dissertation forward. Doing so often requires securing funding to carry out independent research or to release you from your departmental obligations (often teaching or research assistantships). USIP's Peace Scholar Fellowship Program was able to serve this purpose for one of the authors.

Grants and fellowships for PhD candidates often require applicants to demonstrate that they and their research meet the goals and objectives of the funder. USIP's Peace Scholar Fellowship program provides financial and institutional support to a handful of PhD candidates conducting policy-relevant research in the fields of peace studies, security studies, or conflict management (USIP n.d.). Similar to many other candidacy fellowships, this program thus provides “at large” support for candidates whose dissertation research is centered around a specific theme, regardless of the candidate's background. As such, when applying for this fellowship, it was important for the author to demonstrate that he has conducted a (minimum) level of candidate-level research for his dissertation; it was also crucial for his successful application that he emphasized the ways in which his dissertation's research advances USIP's mission, instead of drawing attention to the ways in which he may meet certain demographic requirements (first-generation, low-income, and so forth), as is the case with numerous other grants and fellowships.

Utilizing External Funding to Secure Internal Funding

Financial and research support for graduate students is not equally distributed across all graduate programs: some departments not only expect you to secure external funding to support your progression through the program but also require you to apply for and secure external funding to obtain internal (institutional/departmental) funding. In this way, securing external funding may provide secondary, knock-on effects for you. This was the case for one of the authors, who was required to demonstrate her project's viability and fundability among external centers when applying for internal funding resources. In this case, applying for and successfully obtaining funding from an external institution for her research

project assisted her in securing funding from her degree-granting institution as well.

Securing External Funding Prior to Graduate School

The American Political Science Association Diversity Fellowship provides financial and professional support for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds currently applying to graduate programs and those currently in their first or second year in a PhD program. When applying to this fellowship, the author, who is a member of historically underrepresented groups, sought out advice and support from past successful applicants. Given that the author was also new to political science and to research, her application focused on broad topical areas of interest versus homing in on a specific research question. The author was also able to leverage prior experience in research programs sponsored by APSA to distinguish herself from other applicants and to demonstrate her commitment to the diversity of the discipline.

Securing External Funding as an Early-Career Graduate Student

The NSF GRFP is one of the most highly sought-after external forms of funding for any graduate student. This program provides three years of support over a five-year fellowship period. For each of the three years of support, the NSF GRFP provides a stipend and cost of education allowance to the Fellow's institution. This fellowship relieves teaching and research assistance duties, providing time and financial support to complete the dissertation project and additional research. As an early-career student at an R1 University, one of the authors took advantage of the institutional support available to her as she prepared her application.

Since the NSF GRFP only allows applicants to apply once in either the first or second year of graduate school, the author chose to apply in her second year. This was strategically done for a number of reasons. First, the author was able to successfully obtain internal awards to signal her success as a researcher. Second, as a second-year student, the author was able to receive stronger letters of recommendation from professors at her institution. Third, the author was able to familiarize herself with the different forms of institution support available from various offices at her university. She was able to share her application with past successful applicants from different fields through a university-wide NSF GRFP workshop and review examples of past successful research and personal statements. The author also began her application months prior to the deadline, giving ample time to her advisor and colleagues as they read and reviewed multiple drafts.

Conclusion

You may hear regularly from your advisors, colleagues, and mentors how important it is to apply for and secure external grants and fellowships while in graduate school, yet it requires a significant amount of knowledge and expertise to understand which fellowships and grants you should consider, at what stage in your graduate career you should consider different fellowships and grants, and what considerations to keep in mind as you do so.

Our aim in this chapter has been to “pull back the curtain” on this “hidden curriculum” by providing further clarification along each of these dimensions. More specifically, we begin the chapter by providing a brief overview of what external grants and fellowships are and an outline of the different benefits available in applying for and securing them. We then provide a summary of the different purposes that grants and fellowships serve at different stages in your graduate career, providing a (non-exhaustive) list of some of the most well-known fellowships and grants within each category. We then move into a discussion of the different barriers faced and tradeoffs to keep in mind as you consider applying for external funds; we conclude with a set of vignettes highlighting the different purposes that these resources have served for the authors as they navigate their own graduate careers.

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