

3

Financial Concerns: Taking on Student Loans, Graduate Assistant Positions, and Funding Considerations

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Introduction

Financial concerns can arise when it comes to covering the costs of a graduate program in political science and landing a job post-graduation. This chapter aims to identify ways students can mitigate financial challenges by considering their personal financial situations and the circumstances of their prospective academic institutions. Common experiences during graduate school have also revealed the need to highlight issues that can hinder academic and career success, such as student exploitation. Time is a valuable commodity, and students should consider the amount of time spent completing a program and other prospective obligations that come along with the journey to degree completion, such as graduate assistantships. We argue that financial planning is of great importance before committing to a political science graduate program. In the following, we will discuss the potential financial burden of graduate school, financing options and pitfalls, and strategies for avoiding a high debt burden for graduate studies.

Graduate School Costs and Future Pay

In the United States (US), the average cost of a political science graduate program is estimated at \$20,000 per year (Warren 2021). Students who pursue this degree option typically enter the workforce in a government setting (50% in 2020), or a professional, scientific, and technical services setting (21% in 2020) (BLS 2020). Payscale (2021) has reported that average salaries for master's degrees in political science, public administration, and public policy range from \$65,000–\$72,000 a year, and a PhD in political science has an average annual wage of \$85,000. BLS (2020) data shows that employment for political scientist jobs is expected to grow 9% from 2020–2030, equating to roughly 600 new positions and totaling 7,600 for projected employment. In addition to the sticker price and expected future salary, it is essential to compare the cost of living in the city you are considering, as it makes a difference in the lifestyle you will be able to afford and/or the amount you need to borrow while completing your degree. Major metro and coastal areas are generally significantly more expensive than outlying areas. Consulting an online cost of living calculator such as the one provided by Bankrate¹ is essential to understand the true cost of your degree.

Future Prospects

Three-quarters of all faculty positions are not on the tenure track, according to a 2018 analysis by the American Association of University Professors (Flaherty 2018). In 1980, 70% of faculty were tenured or tenure-eligible. Today, 75% are not tenure eligible, and 47% hold “part-time” positions (AFT 2020). Not having the protection of tenure means less academic freedom and reliance on year-to-year or short multi-year contracts, even if the compensation is sufficient. Tenure track positions are more common at research-focused institutions, but they still only make up about one-third of faculty at those institutions (Flaherty, 2018). Life as contingent faculty can entail challenging situations, making it even harder to pay down debt accrued during a graduate program (see Chapter 44). According to a 2019 survey of contingent faculty, the American Federation of Teachers (2020) reports that one-third of the 3,076 contingent faculty respondents earned less than \$25,000 a year, placing them below the poverty line for a family of four. Only 15% reported they could comfortably cover their basic monthly expenses, fewer than half had access to employer-provided health insurance, and nearly one-fifth relied on Medicaid. Additionally, 41% reported they do not know if they will have a teaching position until one month before the start of an academic year, 75% work on term-to-term appointments, and 37% report they cannot see a path to retirement, though 64% of respondents were over the age of 50. Almost 40% of contingent faculty responded that they had been teaching in higher education for more than 15 years (AFT 2020).

Financial Packages

Full funding packages for political science PhD students generally span a fixed number of years (four–to five), and may include some combination of tuition, a monthly living stipend, medical insurance, funding for study materials, and/or travel stipend. In addition to such benefits, contracts may require maintenance of a minimum GPA and teaching of undergraduates (Warren 2021). In 2017, 53.5% of doctoral students received some sort of financial assistance (Warren 2021). Sources of funding for graduate degrees that do not require repayment are fellowships, scholarships, stipends, grants, and assistantships (though you “repay” assistantships by working). Other public and private loans require repayment, and thus should be minimized to the greatest extent possible. It takes an average of four to eight years to complete a PhD in political science. Even students who enter with full funding packages may need to find other sources once those initial packages run out. Many dissertating students take on teaching assistantships and/or apply for funding from external agencies after an initial research fellowship ends.² Be aware, teaching assistantships may lengthen your time in graduate school and thus increase the total cost of your degree, as they are time spent not working on a dissertation nor earning a full-time salary. However, as the market for full-time positions after graduation has become more competitive, teaching experience and evidence of teaching effectiveness is widely expected for full-time applicants. Other sources of income for graduate students include tutoring, family support, and part-time jobs. While part-time jobs and tutoring may be necessary to keep you afloat financially, they may also impede progress on your degree and are unlikely to be of benefit to you on your curriculum vitae.

Loan Pitfalls

One of the biggest possible *financial pitfalls* is that, unlike undergraduate loan programs, the federal Grad Plus loan program, created in 2005, has no fixed limit on what you can borrow (Korn and Fuller 2021). You can even borrow for living expenses on top of tuition and fees. Because of this, loan amounts can grow very steeply over the course of four to eight years of doctoral studies. This loan program is what makes offering master’s degrees so enticing to universities—students have a way to pay for them, albeit with borrowed money. For the first time, in 2020-2021, graduate students are on track to borrow as much as undergraduate students in the same year (NCES 2018). Average total loan balances (including undergraduate debt, excluding Parent PLUS loans) for students who complete a PhD in any field outside of education doubled between 1999-2000 and 2016-2017, from \$48k to \$99k in inflation-adjusted

dollars (NCES 2018). In 2015–2016, 44% of those who successfully completed a PhD program had graduate debt, while 53% of master's degree completers had debt, reflecting lower institutional support for master's education (IES 2020).

Grad Plus loans can go into payment forbearance when your annual earnings are low, but the interest will continue to grow, so the amount you owe after graduation may grow significantly if your income does not support repayment in a given year, and your future monthly payment will go up if the accrued interest is added to the principal that you owe. Moreover, you will owe even more interest on the higher principal amount. A deferment is a similar suspension of payments for a time; however, you do not accrue interest during deferment. An income-driven repayment plan may make more sense, as your principal will not grow with unpaid interest and you will maintain your eligibility toward eventual loan forgiveness; however, you will owe taxes on the benefit.³

In 2015, the Department of Education imposed “gainful employment” rules on for-profit institutions, such that if the ratio of average debt to average salary two years post-graduation was too high, students could no longer use federal student loans to attend, effectively capping the amount a student could borrow for for-profit graduate education. There is no such limit on borrowing imposed on nonprofit graduate institutions, however (Petersen 2021). Large, untenable education debt has real and extensive consequences well beyond the time when a person is in school. It can make home buying, marriage, children, moving to a different location (such as abroad) and even retirement financially unthinkable for some, and this is particularly something to be wary of when considering some of the common career placements for aspiring academics (see above).

Given the possible debt and career prospects for those with graduate degrees in almost all academic fields, including political science, it is important to keep finances at the front of your mind when choosing to attend a graduate program. If you have decided that a graduate degree in political science is still for you, here are some strategies for minimizing the financial burden of the degree.

How to Think Through Your Financial Situation

All students have differing financial situations that play a role in their graduate school education and the *funding opportunities* they seek. Some students may not be as worried about covering the cost of tuition and other expenses because of support from those in their personal network. Others may be more concerned about incurring costs because they will be solely responsible for the financial burden. Of course, many students fall in between the financial freedom and financial burden poles of this continuum. Asking yourself the following questions is a great first step:

- How many years will it take to complete the program?
- What are the projected costs of living in the region?
- How can I minimize my expenses (having a roommate, living further away, giving up a car)?
- How much am I willing/able to pay for a graduate program? How much debt, if any, have I already incurred during undergraduate studies?
- How much debt am I willing/able to go into? What will my future monthly payments look like?⁴ What is a realistic salary and monthly budget after graduation?
- How can I supplement any funding gaps that may exist? What are my funding options? (See hypothetical example in table below).

After thinking through these questions, you should have a better idea of your personal financial situation. The next step is considering what is being offered to you by graduate programs.

Graduate schools also have differing financial situations. Tuition, fee rates, and funding available to students vary substantially from program to program. Some programs may have strong financial packages to offer prospective students (e.g., research fellowships or graduate assistantships), while others may have none. Funding, or lack thereof, is a significant factor potential students should consider when selecting a graduate program. The answers to the questions above as well as the loan calculating tools provided (see endnote 4) can be used to evaluate which programs should be considered and which may fall lower on the list of options.

When researching the possibility of graduate assistantships, you should collect information about how long the funding will last if awarded the position (contracted year-to-year, length of the program, etc.). It is important to uncover the responsibilities and time expectations that fall within the potential position as well. For example, some assistantships require 20–30 hours weekly of research or teaching responsibilities while completing the program. This can quickly become a heavy workload alongside course completion, comprehensive exam preparation, and other responsibilities as a student. We suggest asking yourself the following questions and weighing these dynamics accordingly:

- How many years does the package cover?
- What type and amount of work is expected in exchange?
- If I do not complete my degree by the end of the last funded year, are there additional internal funding possibilities when I am ABD?

Another step students should consider taking is exploring funding options further to create an action plan. This can be as simple as creating a list of programs you are interested in and then writing out the funding options that are available in those programs. For each program, you could write out the funding options available at the program, department, and college or university level. The funding options can include scholarships, discounted tuition rates, teaching and/or research assistantships, as well as other means. *Table 3.1* is a hypothetical example that can be used as a template to lay out options.

Table 3.1: Template for Comparing Program Costs and Funding

Programs of Interest	Tuition Cost	Program Funding	Department Funding	College/ University Funding
First Choice: Castle University–Master of Public Administration Program	\$20K/per year	Graduate Assistantships (tuition only) three years covered one course as teaching assistant	Travel to Conferences (1 per academic year)	N/A
Second Choice: Saturn College–Master of Public Administration Program	\$30K/per year	N/A	N/A	Potential Scholarships (competitive and differs annually)

Much funding information can be found online; however, it would be beneficial for you to meet with the program coordinator or director for more funding details. You should record all information based on what is available online and during meetings. This information can be used to rank the programs of interest with your individual financial situation in mind.⁵

External Funding

Luckily, there are more funding options than what your prospective graduate program does or does not offer. Other options include but are not limited to grant opportunities, external scholarships, part-time jobs, tutoring, and fellowships. You can and should explore these options in tandem to internal funding. Depending on the tuition costs and personal financial situations, you can determine the amount of funding needed and address opportunities accordingly. With both internal and external funding options, planning well in advance will help you to become more competitive in the application process. In fact, external funding applications often have early deadlines, and even internal assistantship or fellowship funding often requires students to apply and be accepted to their graduate program earlier than students not seeking funding. Additionally, knowing the financial options can help to determine the monetary

gap that may exist and how it can be supplemented.

The following list of sources, although not exhaustive, provides information about potential external funding options for current and future political science graduate students. To evaluate your options, we suggest creating a similar table (as provided above) but for external funding. Resources for finding external funding include:

- Fellowships: The Ohio State University, Department of Political Science: <https://polisci.osu.edu/graduate/current-students/external-funding>
- Scholarships: The Scholarship System, Political Science Scholarships: <https://thescholarshipssystem.com/blog-for-students-families/the-ultimate-list-of-political-science-scholarships/>
- Grants: CollegeGrants.org, Political Science Grants: <https://www.collegegrants.org/building-bridges-utilizing-political-science-college-grants.html>
- Loans: The Office of US Department of Education, Federal Student Aid: <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans>

Student-loan debt surpasses credit card debt in the US and has become the second largest category of consumer debt (Friedman 2020). After looking into all financial options, we recommend that you consider loans as a last resort, even if that means attending your second or third choice program rather than your most desired school, because for most people, student debt can be a significant stumbling block for many years after graduation.

A Word of Caution About Exploitation

It is unfortunate but important to recognize that because finances can be so tight for graduate students, and because working relationships with mentors can be so close and the power differential so large, the potential for exploitation of students in graduate school can be high. In 2016 when an international graduate student at Columbia University reported to the university that they may need to drop out of school because of their tuition costs and the cost of living, the student was informed through official channels that university president Lee Bollinger hires students to walk his dogs, Arthur and Lucy (Korn and Fuller 2021).⁶ But students being asked to provide personal services to faculty members is common, and while it can be mutually beneficial, students may not feel free to decline without fearing retribution. Pet care, house sitting, and personal errand running are common “opportunities” presented to students by their mentors. While this can be a way to make additional funds which faculty know students need, it is less common for professors to consult the schedules and availability or interests of the students they are soliciting. In an open labor market, “applicants” do not fear academic and personal retribution for refusing to accept work. As a student, this is something you may need to navigate, and if you become a faculty member in the future, it is incumbent upon you to recognize the potential that you are exploiting a student with an offer to make more money. A better way to proceed would be to post a listing of what services you are seeking with the terms (pay, hours, timing, location, tasks) upfront, and let students submit their own names for the tasks and recognize that if your preferred student(s) does not apply, there may be valid reasons for that.

Conclusion

There is much to consider financially when deciding to pursue a political science graduate program. This chapter highlights how financial planning can be used to outline graduate program options, their costs, and avenues to minimize debt through funding options such as graduate assistantships and scholarships. Although borrowing money is an option to help cover educational expenses, this can be a major pitfall in terms of paying back the debt with job outlook and average salaries in mind. Investing in a graduate education has many benefits; however, you can be better prepared to weigh the costs of this education by considering financing options as well as other barriers (i.e., exploitation) that can occur in pursuit of a graduate degree. It is important to be cognizant of the financial implications of furthering your education. There are systemic dynamics and cultural norms about education that can obscure some

genuine pitfalls that have been created by both policy and circumstance in the academy. Be realistic about your financial future and weigh your choices accordingly.

Endnotes

- 1 There are multiple cost of living calculators to be found online, but Bankrate offers a nicely detailed one: <https://www.bankrate.com/calculators/savings/moving-cost-of-living-calculator.aspx>.
- 2 Sallie Mae maintains a database of external graduate school scholarships: <https://www.salliemae.com/student-loans/graduate-school-information/graduate-school-scholarships/>
- 3 See for more info: <https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/lower-payments/get-temporary-relief>
- 4 For a federal student loan calculator to estimate your payments, see: <https://studentaid.gov/loan-simulator/>.
- 5 The Wall Street Journal has created an excellent tool to compare debt to financial prospects for some institutions and degrees which may help you to compare the financial implications of similar degrees at different schools: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-a-graduate-degree-worth-the-debt-check-it-here-11626355788>
- 6 Pres. Bollinger stated that this was never intended to supplant university support, just provide extra spending money.

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