We have designed this handbook to be a compass to all voyagers who have chosen to travel the winding roads of graduate training in the Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University.

Our graduate program offers a Ph.D. in four fields: American Politics, International Relations, Political Theory and Comparative Politics. We have faculty who are not only nationally and internationally known for their research, but are prepared personally to direct a student's course of study. The size of our program permits much more personalized instruction than is typically found at larger institutions. And unlike many small departments around the country, we have chosen not to focus on only one or two fields, or to establish a single methodological orthodoxy. Instead, we have established clusters of expertise that employ diverse methodologies within each of the four major fields. In this way, we can provide broad social science training to our students and still ensure that our Ph.D.s have the kind of specialized training that is required to be a successful scholar and teacher.

**Admission**

Admission to the graduate programs is through online application. Applicants for both the MA and Ph.D. must submit:

- an official transcript from each college or university attended;
- recent GRE scores, for the verbal, mathematical, and written portions of the exam;
- three letters of recommendation from people who are familiar with the applicant's academic record;
- a statement of purpose indicating the student's interests and career goals;
- a writing sample (preferably a paper from a course that illustrates the candidate's ability to write and to conduct research).

*Students from non-English-speaking countries should also submit a recent TOEFL score*

Applicants should go to the [Graduate School](#) Web page for more information on admission. Click here to access the online application for Political Science. There is no charge for online applications.

When making decisions to admit, the Graduate Committee weighs all of the evidence - grades, recommendations, GRE's and TOEFL scores, writing sample and statement of purpose. Candidates should have an overall undergraduate GPA of at least 3.3, and a GPA of 3.5 in their major field. There is no minimum score for the GRE's, but students admitted usually average at least 625 on the verbal and mathematics components. The average TOEFL score for foreign students admitted is 600. Of course, strong letters of recommendation are also essential. In addition, we make sure that there is a fit between the student's interest and our scholarly expertise.
Financial Aid

The department supplies financial assistance on a competitive basis to well-qualified applicants. Each year it grants fellowships to entering Ph.D. students on the basis of scholarly attainment and promise of professional achievement. Normally, all students admitted to the Ph.D. program are provided with full fellowship support. Fellowships pay all tuition and fees as well as a competitive cash stipend. Stipends will equal or exceed $15,500 in 2008-2009. (The total value of a doctoral fellowship will be over $38,000 per year in 2008-2009.) Fellowships are renewable for five years for students making satisfactory progress towards their doctorates. Fellowships recipients will devote full time to their course during one year of their study and will work twenty hours per week as a graduate teaching or research assistant during their other years of residence. The department may have other financial assistance available from grants and contracts held by faculty members. Applicants with outstanding records are nominated by the department for Harold Stirling Vanderbilt Scholarships or Arts and Science Select Graduate Fellowships, awarded competitively by the University, which provide additional stipend of $3000 to $5,000 per year. The University, through the graduate school, also awards fellowships for students from underrepresented populations on a competitive basis.

Entering and enrolled students are encouraged to apply for additional support from sources outside the university, particularly for dissertation research. External funding is not only a sign of a promising graduate career, but it provides students additional time to complete their Ph.D.'s. The GraduateSchool and the Director of Graduate Studies in Political Science can provide information on sources of funding.

Requirements for the MA

We are primarily a Ph.D. program but there are four ways to earn an MA.

1. MA candidates must complete 24 hours of course work and submit a thesis. The thesis is directed and approved by a two-person committee - the student's adviser and one other faculty member. Among the 24 hours, students must have completed the two course sequence in methods (PSCI 355 and 356) and at least 6 hours in one field. The department admits a limited number of students to a "four plus one" program designed to allow students to complete their bachelor's and master's degrees in four years of undergraduate plus one year of graduate study.

2. The MA can be awarded after 33 hours of course work (including PSCI 355 and 356), if the student maintains a 3.0 average in 300-level courses (which must comprise at least 27 of the 33 hours) and passes a master's examination in the field of choice.

3. Ph.D. students can earn a "Masters in Passing" after passing preliminary examinations, completing all course requirements, and successfully defending the dissertation proposal. Students are encouraged to apply for this degree, when they have met the requirements, since it may open a few doors for them as they pursue teaching or research opportunities prior to the completion of the Ph.D.
4. A handful of students may also earn a "terminal MA." This degree is awarded to students who fail to pass their prelims, but have done well in their course work. This degree is awarded on a case by case basis, after petitioning the Graduate School for approval of such a degree.

Requirements for the Ph.D.

Ph.D. candidates must complete 72 credits, including 48 hours of course work, and 24 hours of thesis credit. Students are required to complete three fields:

- **Field One:** completion of at least 3 courses, one of which is normally expected to be the core course; and completion of a written prelim;
- **Field Two:** completion of at least 3 courses, one of which is normally expected to be the core course; and completion of a written prelim;
- **Field Three:** completion of 2 courses, with a grade of B or better in each, which normally includes either:
  a) the "core" seminar for that field, plus any other course in that field.
  OR
  b) two courses in a cognate field outside of political science. This option can be taken only with the prior permission of the Director of Graduate Studies and the student's advisor.
  OR
  c) two courses in research methods. To take methods as the third field, students are expected to take PSCI 352 and some other methods course within the Department, or an approved course outside the department (including the ICPSR Summer Training Program.).

Students must also complete a methods sequence, which includes an introduction to research design (PSCI 351) and introduction to statistics (PSCI 350). These two courses cannot be counted towards a third field in methods.

In the third year, students must take a dissertation seminar. This course is designed to help students make progress on their dissertation. If the course is not offered in their third year, students need to take it in their fourth year. Students are encouraged to take the course both years, but are not required to do so.

Students normally take their two written prelims in September of the third year. Students whose program of research (e.g., conducting field research) requires taking prelims at different times can take them in January of the third year. To take prelims in that January, the student must have the permission of both the DGS and their dissertation adviser. Students may elect to take prelims as early as January of the second year, with the approval of the DGS and their adviser.

Students who fail one or both of their prelims must petition the Graduate Committee to retake them. Normally, students can expect a second chance to pass a prelim. But students with weak records may be denied that opportunity, and therefore denied further funding and/or asked to leave the program.
This decision will be made by the Graduate Committee in conjunction with the student's adviser. A second failure of a prelim automatically revokes the students' funding.

Limits on the number of 200-level courses:
Ph.D. students may take two 200-level courses for credit toward the degree; any other 200-level courses must be approved in advance by the Director of Graduate Studies.

Research Methods

As indicated above, students must take at least a two course sequence in methods in their first year of study. These courses are offered by the Department. In rare circumstances substitutions will be allowed. However, students who find a methods course of interest in another Department on campus can seek that additional training (providing that both the Director of Graduate Studies and the Chair of the student's committee agree to it). In some fields, students may be encouraged or even required by their committee to take more advanced courses in statistics. We also encourage all students to take the methods summer training at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) in Michigan. This program is internationally recognized, offering a wide range of methods courses. The Department can provide some summer support for this program.

The goal of our method and statistics requirement is to make sure that every student has some minimal level of competency in these essential skills. Such knowledge is necessary to be able to follow the many scholarly debates in our discipline. The Department does not, however, have any methodological orthodoxy. Students can pursue their research from a variety of perspectives. We do share a set of values about what constitutes good empirical research. Projects must be undertaken in a way that ensures accurate findings and generalizable conclusions. Hence, a sound research design is imperative. So, too, is an appreciation of the need for a multi-method perspective. That is, if you undertake an important case study, it should be strengthened by gathering other forms of data to test your hypotheses. On the other hand, if you employ survey data, it would also be helpful to supplement those data with content analysis or careful archival work. It should also be noted that undergirding these methodological concerns is the need for good theory. Students should be able to offer important theoretical insights in their research.

To ensure that they do gain the appropriate set of skills for their field of research, students need additional training.

For Political Theory, students must demonstrate an ability to read a foreign language that is relevant to their area of interest.

In American politics and International Relations, students will need to undertake additional training in research methods, which can be accomplished by earning a B or better in our advanced statistics course (PSCI 352). Students, however, can petition to apply to take another advanced course in methods to meet this requirement if it fits their program of research. This petition must be approved by the student's dissertation adviser and the Director of Graduate Studies.
Students in Comparative politics may pursue either the language training or the advanced statistics option, depending on which set of skill best prepares them to do research in their field. Students, can petition to apply to take another advanced course in methods to meet this requirement if it fits their program of research. This petition must be approved by the student’s dissertation adviser and the Director of Graduate Studies.

**Plan of Study**

Ph.D. students are required to submit a two page plan of study by the end of their third semester in the program, outlining

a) their choice of the three fields;  
b) the courses they have completed and plan to take to meet the requirements in those fields, and how the courses fit together;  
c) when they plan to take the preliminary examinations; and  
d) the general topic of the dissertation.

The plan of study must be approved by the student’s adviser and the Director of Graduate Studies.

**Progress Toward the Degree**

Ph.D. students are expected to:

a) maintain a GPA of 3.3 in their first semester in the program, and a 3.4 thereafter;  
b) finish any incomplete by the end of the succeeding term;  
c) complete and have accepted a plan of study by the end of their third semester in the program;  
d) complete the normal load of organized courses-- 6 to 8 each year in years 1 and 2; 2-4 in year 3;  
e) complete preliminary exams and the dissertation proposal on schedule.

**Teaching Assistantships**

Departmental funding provides students with a fellowship (with no work responsibilities outside of class) during one year of graduate study. In the other years of their Ph.D. fellowships, students serve as teaching or research assistants in the Department with an average work responsibility of 20 hours per week. The opportunity to assist in a course provides valuable teaching experience that will prove important in your academic career. The tasks of teaching assistants vary from class to class, but Teaching Assistants can expect to be an integral part of the course, crafting examinations, grading them, and giving occasional lectures. For introductory undergraduate courses, some teaching assistants will teach their own discussion section of about 25 students that meets once a week. The chance to teach these sections provides additional experience in the classroom. Advanced graduate students may be assigned to teach their own courses, once they have passed their prelims and become official candidates for the Ph.D. (in their 4th or 5th years of graduate school).
The Department tries to assign Teaching Assistants to courses that best fit their graduate careers, although this is not always possible because of undergraduate teaching needs. By the end of their teaching assistantships, students will have acquired the skills necessary to be successful teachers.

**Research Assistantships**

Each semester the department will assign a number of students to research assistant responsibilities. Research assistants may be assigned to work with individual faculty members or groups of faculty on their ongoing research programs, to serve as editorial interns on departmentally-edited journals (such as the *Journal of Politics*, currently edited by Professor John Geer), or to perform other research tasks of benefit to the department. Students who serve as research assistants learn the skills necessary to become effective political science research scholars. Research Assistants are often invited to coauthor publications with their faculty mentors.

**Preliminary Examinations**

Normally, the Department conducts preliminary examinations in September and January each year. The exact timing is determined by the Director of Graduate Studies and the faculty in the subfield. Faculty in each field craft the examination and students are encouraged to seek the advice of the relevant faculty in that field.

Each student is expected to understand the major debates in the field, showing a grasp of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature. Successful completion of the preliminary examinations shows that students are able to teach and do research in those fields. Hence, the Department expects a high level of performance on them that demonstrates an analytical understanding of the material. If these standards are not met, students can be given another chance to take the exam. If the second attempt proves unsuccessful, the student will be asked to leave the program.

The Department does not designate a "reading list" for each field. Instead, we expect students to have learned the major questions in their field through their course work and additional preparation. It is important to understand that class work only provides a framework to understand scholarly debates. It is imperative that students go beyond the required reading in the class and that students consult with individual members of the faculty in preparation for the examination. In an effort to meet the first requirement, we suggest that all students subscribe to at least the lead journal in the discipline, the *American Political Science Review*. To help in this regard, the Department does have subscriptions to a number of major journals in political science that are available in the PoliticsStudyCenter.

**Dissertation**

Dissertation proposals must be defended no later than the first month of the semester following completion of preliminary exams. The student must have 4 scholars on the committee. The composition of the committee should be made in consultation with the student's major advisor, who will serve as chair of the dissertation committee, and the Director of Graduate Studies. Individuals who
are not members of the Graduate Faculty at Vanderbilt may serve on a student's dissertation committee, where their expertise is relevant to guide the student in his or her research. Graduate Faculty at Vanderbilt include faculty members who are tenure-track or tenured in departments or programs offering the MA or Ph.D.. All others (including individuals who are research-track, clinical, or professional, or who are outside the university) must be approved by the Dean of the Graduate School. Requests to appoint such an individual to a dissertation committee should be made in writing to the Dean of the Graduate College, should be accompanied by a curriculum vitae, and should be submitted no later than two weeks before the student's Ph.D. preliminary examination is to be held.

**Placement**

One of the major concerns of Ph.D. students is securing an academic job. In recent years, the Department has placed students at such research institutions as the University of Michigan, the University of Kentucky, the University of Missouri, Florida State University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, Emory University, and Case Western Reserve University, as well as at teaching institutions and comprehensive state universities such as Mary Washington University, the University of the Cumberlands, Belmont University, Northern Kentucky University, Kennesaw State University, and Middle Tennessee State University. We are committed to getting every student a good job. That goal, however, takes work on both ends. Students who apply for jobs need to make sure that their dissertations are complete or nearly so. In addition, students need to engage in professional activity, such as publishing in refereed journals and participating at scholarly conferences. It is very important that first year students start to think about building the kind of profile that will maximize their chances for good jobs down the road. The market can be competitive and we need to make sure we have a every possible advantage that will make your credentials attractive. That process starts the day you enter graduate school. As an indication of the importance of this task, we ask a member of the faculty to concentrate on the Department's graduate placement each year. You should seek out that person for advice about placement, what areas are "hot," and what ingredients make for a successful applicant.

**Support for Professional Activity**

The Graduate School provides support for Ph.D. students to make one trip per year to present their research at a major professional conference. Applications are available in the Department office and should be approved by the Director of Graduate Studies and then sent to the Dean of the Graduate School prior to travel. We also try to do what we can to make sure students gain some professional visibility. The department may also have some funds that it can contribute to support graduate student travel to make professional presentations. Frequently, students and faculty work on research projects together. Some joint projects have led to publication and a number have yielded papers at professional conferences. We are constantly seeking to upgrade our support for professional activity. Part of that effort is for students to seek outside funding for their professional trips. The American Political Science Association (APSA), for instance, funds some students to travel to its Annual Meeting held at the end of August each year. Participation in the APSA Annual Meeting and the meeting of other important national and regional meetings such as those of the International Studies
Association and the Southern and Midwest Political Science Associations should become a habit that graduate students forms early in their careers.

We urge all students to seek the advice of their advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies in regard to these matters. It is essential to our students’ success that they become professionally visible and we are committed to helping in any way possible.

Computers and Library Resources

Vanderbilt University has an extensive library system. The main library houses all the relevant books and journals necessary for graduate study, and seven other specialty libraries dot the campus. In addition, the Department has a small collection of journals and other materials in the Politics Study Center. A great many of the most important scholarly journals and other research resources are available to Vanderbilt students via the Internet.

The University also has extensive computer facilities that provide all students access to statistical packages, email, and the Internet. The Department has a small cluster of computers dedicated to graduate student use. In addition, there is a sizable computer lab in the Microcomputer Laboratories located in adjacent Garland Hall. These machines have all the hardware and software capabilities graduate students will need to work effectively. The department is always willing to purchase or acquire additional hardware or software licenses that would improve graduate student computing resources.

Vanderbilt is a member of the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), the most important data archive in political science and related social sciences. Graduate students have easy access to the many data sets housed in that archive. There are data stored at ICPSR that speak to interests in all fields. In addition, the department is willing to assist graduate students in acquiring whatever data resources they may need for their work, within reasonable cost limits. Finally, it is worth noting that the The Television News Archive is on campus. This Archive holds a copy of every major network evening news broadcast since the early 1970s. The Archive is internationally known and provides an important resource for students interested in the new media.

Conclusion

Graduate school is a rewarding experience. The opportunity to undertake research allows students to be on the cutting edge of their fields. The ability to produce new knowledge is an important skill. But it is not one that comes easily. It takes training and lots of it. The Department will try to make that experience as intellectually stimulating as possible. As you proceed down this road, be sure to take advantage of the many resources Vanderbilt University provides.