FACULTY OF ARTS
Department of Political Science

After a B.A. Degree...

What About Graduate Studies in Political Science?

Updated November, 2016
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1. Should I pursue an MA or PhD after my B.A., or would it be better to find a job a year or two beforehand?

The decision to pursue an MA or a PhD degree is a significant one. It should be made only after considerable investigation of graduate programs available and analysis of your long-term goals and interests. If you are seriously interested in a particular field of study, if a professor has encouraged you to pursue a graduate degree, if you love research and scholarship for its own sake, then a graduate degree may be for you.

You should not apply to graduate school simply because you do not know what career to pursue or what jobs are available with your BA. Having a graduate degree does not necessarily make you more employable than someone with an undergraduate degree. If you are uncertain about your future goals, you might find it useful to take a year off to work or study in a new environment, either at home or abroad, which can help you to decide on a new direction. If you do decide to apply to graduate school later on, selection committees may look favourably upon your application, especially if there is some link between the activities during your time away and your potential studies. If you take off more than a year, you should maintain some connection with the professors who will be writing a letter of recommendation for you.

The career advisers at the McGill Career Planning Service can help you look at your options with regards to potential possibilities. See [http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/decision](http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/decision)

As well, they have information on their website which describes some of the career possibilities with your BA. See CAPS at [http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/explore](http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/explore)
2. **What are the main differences between an MA and a PhD?**

The *doctoral degree* generally takes between four to seven years to complete. PhD programs are designed to prepare students for university teaching, research, or advanced positions in certain professional fields. Funding is often available through grants, fellowships, teaching or research assistantships.

Depending on the graduate program, you can apply directly to the PhD from an undergraduate degree if you meet the appropriate criteria for acceptance. In these programs, the MA degree is often earned along the way, and will generally focus on the research techniques or the fields of study in which you will be involved at the PhD level. A combined MA/PhD program can take less time to completion than a terminal MA followed by a transfer to a PhD program. Going directly into a PhD program from a BA is particularly useful if you are completely dedicated to your area of study and you plan to teach or research at the university level, or study in a research-intensive field.

The time to completion for a *master’s degree* is generally not as long as a PhD, typically taking between one and three years for full-time students. MA programs generally focus more on gaining knowledge of the field and, in more professionally-oriented programs, gaining knowledge in practical application of research and skills. Some MA programs require students to write a thesis, and others do not; some provide students with the option. Some MA programs offer graduate funding; others do not. It is important to check with the graduate programs you are interested in to see whether and how they fund MA students.

A terminal MA program (i.e., an MA that does not lead directly into, or is not integrated into a PhD program) can still be a useful preparation for those seeking to continue their graduate education. In some cases, a terminal MA may not fully prepare you for a PhD program - further coursework may be required before you can transfer into the PhD after completing an MA program.

Some MA programs are professionally oriented and offer direct career preparation or advancement outside of higher education. For example, if your goal is to become a social worker, a high school teacher, or college teacher at a Quebec CEGEP, a master’s degree may be appropriate for you.
Graduate school is quite different from undergraduate studies. It requires more focused and sustained work. It is a research degree program and, as such, involves more intensive, one-on-one relationships with faculty and interaction with other students. Most graduate coursework usually consists of a substantial amount of structured reading in a particular field in the early years, and, depending on the school, graduate program, and country in which it is being offered, typically requires less coursework than at the undergraduate level. Courses for the most part also tend to be of the seminar type.

A key part of the graduate school experience is having the opportunity to work with a community of scholars in your own research area. In many programs, it is expected that you will begin to present your research at scholarly conferences and begin to build a publication record. Along with becoming a competent researcher, graduate school prepares you to acquire a professional identity.
4. When Should I start planning for graduate studies?

The sooner you start to prepare for graduate studies, the better. Advanced planning and preparation will greatly improve your chances of meeting the criteria required for acceptance to a school and program of your choice.

Get involved in undergraduate research to find out if this is what you would like to undertake as a career. Some graduate programs require applicants to demonstrate their research ability, either through undergraduate theses or other undergraduate research opportunities. All Arts undergraduate departments offer honours and joint honours programs which have a research component such as an essay or project. Normally students are admitted to an honours program after one year of studies in the major program. Students must have a CGPA of 3.00 at the very least to be admitted to an honours program. In some cases, the department may require a much higher CGPA as the number of students they admit into the honours program is very limited. So if you are interested in an honours program, work on getting good grades right from your first year of studies.

If you decide not to pursue an honours program, you may still be able to get involved in research with one of your professors during the term or over the summer months. Start by speaking to a professor whose course you took, liked and did well in. Ask them if they could help you get involved in a research project in their area. They may be able to help you or refer you to someone else. You may also be able to register for independent study courses that provide one-on-one or small group training around a current research project in the department.

An internship outside of McGill may lead to your involvement with an off-campus project of some sort that you can integrate with a university research project. The Faculty of Arts offers an impressive internship program for Arts undergraduates. For more details, please consult the Arts Internship website at [http://www.mcgill.ca/arts-internships/](http://www.mcgill.ca/arts-internships/).
5. Timeline for Planning Graduate Studies U0 and U1

First Year (U0)

- Learn about degree/program requirements; investigate the requirements needed to get into an honours program.

- Take a variety of courses from different departments to learn more about your interests and abilities, and the universities’ offerings.

- Balance your studies with interesting and fulfilling extra-curricular activities.

- Look into the possibility of doing internships, exchanges, field study courses, study abroad.

- Work on achieving good grades.

Second Year (U1)

- Learn about degree/program requirements; investigate the requirements to get into an honours program.

- Select the departmental programs of your choice.

- Select your complementary and elective courses carefully with a mind to narrowing down your area of interest, and getting to know a few professors well.

- Look into the possibility of doing internship programs, field study courses, exchanges, and study abroad.

- Meet with an appropriate departmental professor for additional information and advice.

- Work on improving your grades.
6. Timeline for Planning Graduate Studies

U2

Third Year (U2)

- Select an honours program, if possible or appropriate.
- Choose your complementary and elective courses carefully, keeping in mind your long term goals.
- Register for internships, field study courses, independent study courses, summer research programs, exchanges, study abroad.
- Write articles for undergraduate publications.
- Narrow down a selection of graduate programs and universities that interest you; spend time in the library and surfing the web; visit schools if possible; contact the graduate departments in those schools for further information.
- Ensure that you meet their criteria for acceptance to graduate programs that interest you by taking appropriate courses (for example, statistics) and so forth.
- Meet with an appropriate departmental professor for additional information and advice.
- Ask appropriate professors for letters of recommendation.
- Prepare your letter of intent/profile letter/statement of purpose.
- Start the application process.
- Apply for fellowships and grants along with your application for admission.
- Prepare to take the GRE exams over the summer; register for a course that prepares you for the GRE exams.
- Investigate other options besides Graduate studies in case your application is not accepted.
- Work on improving your grades.
7. Timeline for Planning Graduate Studies

U3

Fourth Year (U3)

• Choose your complementary and elective courses carefully, with a view to your long-term goals.

• Register for some courses at the 400 level or higher. Consult the appropriate department. Note that Faculty and departmental permission is required to take 600 level courses.

• Submit your applications for admission and for funding by the fall deadlines.

• Retake your GRE exams if your summer results were not strong.

• Evaluate any offers from Graduate schools carefully. If you have been accepted to more than one institution, you may have to do some further investigating to finalize your choice.

• Work on improving your grades.
8. **How do I go about searching for a good program that suits my needs?**

Your education has to fit with your abilities, interests, and goals. Your choice of program should be based on specific criteria such as the kind of research and scholarship you want to be further trained in, the type of courses and research areas covered by the faculty in the programs you are interested in, the chance to study with leading figures and active researchers in your field. Other considerations might include the availability of fellowships and graduate assistantships to assist with your funding needs.

Figure out the research areas that you are interested in, and begin to research programs that can offer you training in those areas. To do this, follow up on citations in the scholarly literature to find out more about the authors, what kind of research they do, and the universities and graduate programs in which they teach. Finding faculty who can train you to do the kind of research you want to do is essential. In light of your own interests, consider the strengths of the different programs and graduate courses universities offer, and what their faculty publish and teach. McGill professors can also be an excellent source of information about the different graduate programs available in your field.

Guidebooks can also provide comprehensive information about faculty reputation, student placement, teaching and research opportunities, financial aid, and so on. However, make sure that the information pertains to your desired specialization within the discipline; a school with a top ranking in labour economics for example, may not be ranked so highly in applied economics.

Make an effort to visit the schools you may be interested in to find out more about the campus, the department, and the facilities. Attend recruiting events for prospective graduate students if they are available; if not, find out whether you can arrange a visit on your own. You may find it useful to meet professors in the department, or to sit in on a seminar session, if that is permissible. Learn about the faculty - their publications and research. When you write your statement of purpose, commenting on particular faculty members’ research and publications tells the admissions committee that you have done your homework in researching their program.

The supervisor with whom you undertake your research with may be just as important as your research interests. You should think about the kind of person you will need to help you succeed in graduate school. Take the time to read the books and journals that are relevant to your field. Look up those professors’ home pages, which should provide you with information about their research and publications. Find out as much as you can about their work, their graduate students, their contributions. You may at some point wish to contact this person. Send them a short email outlining your interests and plans. This is also a good way of finding out whether the professor is interested and has resources to accept a new student.
9. How do I find out about the qualifications required for acceptance to graduate schools?

Once you have narrowed down your specialization within a particular field or discipline, and have found a number of universities that offer interesting programs in that field, it is time to start the application process. Read all the information about the criteria for admission as early as you can in your undergraduate career: CGPA requirements, undergraduate research, the minimum number of credits required at the undergraduate level in that discipline, the recommended type of undergraduate program, particular course requirements, graduate entrance exams (GREs), related work experience if specified, challenging courses of study. Some criteria will require more than one or two years of undergraduate preparation to fulfill.

While grades are very important, it is wrong to assume that grades are enough. There are lots of students out there with good grades who are interested in graduate study. You will need other qualifications to distinguish yourself. Besides requiring undergraduate research, many graduate admission committees will be reviewing your record to determine how challenging your undergraduate program and course selection has been. Upper 500 level courses are considered to be an excellent preparation for graduate school. Many admissions committees pay particular attention to your letters of recommendation. Writing a strong statement of purpose and choosing the right programs to apply to for the work you want to do are other very important elements of your application.

Graduate schools generally expect you to have completed all prerequisites by the application deadline. If you are unable to do so, then it is best to postpone your application. Graduate schools do not generally frown upon students who have been out of school for a year or so. Some, in fact, prefer it - especially in fields where practical experience is one of the factors that the admissions committee is considering.
10. Where can I find out about funding?

Check out eligibility for funding, internal or external. External funding refers to monetary awards given by federal agencies or privately-run foundations which may be used for study at any accredited graduate school (e.g., SSHRC, FQRSC). External funding agencies will have their own application procedures and deadlines, separate from the schools you are applying to.

Internal aid comes directly from the graduate schools you enrol in. They may be need-based or merit-based. Applications are normally included with the graduate school application. This type of aid comes in the form of research assistantships, teaching assistantships, fellowships or grants based on merit, or need-based financial aid. If the information is not readily available on the graduate department’s website, call and find out what is available. Financial aid could include tuition waivers, room and board, and even a living stipend. So it is best to apply for as much financial aid as possible, in whatever form you can, and by the appropriate deadlines.

Additional information can be found at http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/finance
11. **What is involved in the application process?**

Applications are normally submitted during the last year of undergraduate studies. Try to compile all of the documents and submit the completed application package in a timely manner:

- application form
- funding applications
- GRE results
- statement of purpose
- letters of recommendation
- academic transcripts
- a resume or a CV

Some schools will not review applications until the package is complete. So if yours is incomplete, other completed applications will have priority over yours.

You should expect to apply to several graduate schools, depending on the level of competition in your area.

Applications are generally due during the fall term, so you should start the application process in the term prior to your last year of studies.
12. Are Entrance Exams Required?

- Some graduate schools require the GRE, Graduate Record Exams. These scores are generally interpreted as a measure of intellectual ability and likelihood of success at graduate school, so it is best to obtain the highest scores you can. Several books are available to help students prepare for such tests. It is also possible in some areas to register for courses that help you to prepare for these exams. You can write the GREs more than once so, if you have done poorly in the first round, you can take them again and have the results available with your fall application.

- Other exams that may be required, depending on your application, are LSATs or MCATs.

- You can find the books to help you prepare for entrance exams in the CaPS Career Resource Centre in the Brown Building, as well as the application forms and information booklets. See also the CaPS online-guides about entrance exams: [http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/test/](http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/test/)
Ask professors who know your interests and abilities well (normally, you will need at least three letters of recommendation). In general, it is best to request letters from faculty who are tenured or are teaching in the tenure stream. You may need to ‘cultivate’ several professors, if you will, by taking several of their courses spaced over a period of two or more years, making solid contributions in their courses, and getting involved in some way in their research, such as working with them on research projects or in research labs. Make sure that they will be willing to write a strong supporting letter. Provide them with information about each of the graduate programs you are applying to and suggest academic and personal strengths that you are asking them to highlight. Give them a draft of your Statement of Purpose, as well as a copy of your curriculum vitae and advising transcript for reference.

Provide your referees with the full name, title, and complete mailing address of the person to whom a letter should be written. You may also provide your referees with pre-stamped and addressed envelopes, if they prefer.

Give your referees ample time to write letters, at least one month before deadlines. Follow up with them to ensure that the letters have been completed on time. Don't forget to thank them for their efforts on your behalf.

Additional information can be found at: [http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/references/](http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/references/)
14. **How do I write a Statement of Purpose? What do I include?**

The statement of purpose is an important part of your application, and may in fact be the determining factor in acceptance or rejection. It should provide the reader with a sense of your potential as a student and as a professional. It should describe your intellectual interest and academic preparation in the field - why you are interested in this particular graduate program, and how it can help you achieve your goals.

You should suggest possible areas for research that would fit in with the work already being accomplished in the unit you are applying to. You might propose specific questions that intrigue you, indicate how you might approach them, and why this line of inquiry would contribute new knowledge in the field. In this mini-proposal (which may very well change once you actually start your graduate degree) your point is to illustrate your ability to think independently and creatively, and to demonstrate how your research interests fit with the department.

If you have already done some research in the area, it might be useful to attach the research paper with your application. You should explain the connection between the papers and the research you would like to be involved in.

If your CGPA is not particularly high because of problems in your first year or in courses outside of your discipline, you might find it helpful to point out that your upper level term GPAs are significantly higher.

Your essay should demonstrate excellent writing skills. Make sure that it is well constructed with no grammar, spelling or punctuation errors. It should be concise, typed, single spaced, about two pages in length. Have friends, professors, or mentors read over your statement to critique it. Is it interesting? Have you provided a compelling argument to the committee? Have you overstated or understated your qualifications? Have you explained any deficiencies in your background? Is it grammatically correct and well constructed?

Before submitting your statement of purpose along with your applications, you can have it reviewed by a Career Adviser at CaPS. Make an appointment by phone (514-398-3304) or drop by CaPS in the Brown Building. You can also review the following website for samples of writing statements: [http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/statements/](http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/statements/)
The major fields of Political Science are:
Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Political Theory. These apply at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In Canadian universities, Canadian Politics is a separate field. In American universities, American Politics is also a separate field. Some universities also offer fields such as Political Economy, Public Administration, Policy Studies and Analysis, Political Philosophy, and Political Ideology.

Our department has significant strength in Canadian Politics, Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Political Theory. We also have expertise in most regions of the developed and developing worlds.

For further information on graduate studies in the Department of Political Science, McGill University, please see [www.mcgill.ca/politicalscience/grad/](http://www.mcgill.ca/politicalscience/grad/)

All faculty members in the Department are available to advise students about graduate studies in Political Science. The advising schedule is located at: [http://www.mcgill.ca/politicalscience/](http://www.mcgill.ca/politicalscience/)

Scholarships/Fellowships: SSHRC, National Science Foundation, McGill Fellowships, FQRSC (Quebec government fellowships).

Examples of the career paths of some of our undergraduate students who went on to graduate studies and professional careers include:

- Canadian foreign service officer and Ambassador to China
- Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, Ambassador to Israel, and journalist
- Pulitzer Prize winning political commentator in Washington
- Several university professors of political science
- Business school professor and venture capitalist
- Law school professor, MP, and Minister of Justice
- Lawyers in private practice and public service
16. **Resources**

**CaPS (Career Planning Services):** Applying to Graduate Studies and Professional Schools  
http://www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/gradschool/

**McGill Graduate Studies:** Fellowships Office  
http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/fellowships/

**McGill Graduate Studies:** Prospective Graduate Students  
http://www.mcgill.ca/gradapplicants/

**Department of Political Science, McGill University:**  
http://www.mcgill.ca/politicalscience/grad